Australians at War Film Archive
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George, could you give us a brief summary of your life to date?

Well I was born 1929, February 1929 in a little, at the time, suburb of Brisbane, called Wooloowin. Wooloowin is only really a few kilometres from the city and as I grew up there in the first few years I thought that the city of Brisbane which I can see on the horizon, was miles away, but it wasn't. I lived in Brisbane in three locations, Wooloowin, Windsor and Shorncliffe until I was about eight. Dad got a change of job and we moved to Melbourne. I went to school in Melbourne in the primary school, Lloyd Street Central School and then subsequently into Melbourne Boys' High School. This was during the war years and I was bitten like most young men, with the need to be part of the war, and at the age of 16 I left school and went to sea in the Merchant Navy. When I was old enough, I was 17 and a half years I joined the Royal Australian Navy as a radar technician, trainee. I spent the next almost 15 years in the navy. I then resigned my commission. I became an officer. I resigned my commission for reasons that perhaps I will talk about later, and I went into the hard cold world of civilian life. I started in desperation because I had a family to support, selling socks in David Jones. I then graduated from that after a few weeks to Channel 9, on the outside broadcast unit. From there I joined a little known company at the time that manufactured big accounting machines, time clocks and mechanical typewriters. That company was IBM [International Business Machines], and I stayed with IBM for 25 years. I, tongue in cheek, say that I had 25 years of undiscovered crime in IBM and I resigned, or retired actually, at the age of 57 in 1986, and in the years since then I have done all sorts of interesting things. I suddenly discovered that there was a world outside of the cloistered life of IBM. I

had a marvellous time, but I have to admit it was difficult for the first four or five years adjusting to the lifestyle.

Well thank you for the summary, that's good and concise and also gives us some highlights that we can be aware of as we go through.

OK.

Now just returning to the beginning, once again if I can have you tell us when and where you were born and maybe if you'd like to give us a few more details about the suburb in which you were born.

Yes, OK, I was born in Wooloowin which is a suburb of Brisbane, close suburb but at the time the family owned a house in Windsor, which is a neighbouring suburb, so my early memories are of the house in Windsor. At the age of four and a half I went to the Windsor State School, and this was in the Depression days, people had no money, and I mean no money. I can recall my mother telling me in later years that she used to put me in the pram and my brother who was almost five years old, he would walk along side the pram, and she would wheel the pram from Wooloowin to the Valley, Fortitude Valley in Brisbane which probably is about 3 miles away, to do the shopping because shopping there was a little bit cheaper. Besides which she saved thruppence fare for herself, both ways, so that was sixpence, and a penny for my brother, so she saved eightpence by doing that. People these days just can't understand how tough things must have been for those unfortunate parents in those Depression days. I stayed at the Windsor school for perhaps two years and then the family moved to Wooloowin; we were only there a short time. Dad at that time had been a radio engineer at 4BC Brisbane but he had a bug for flying so he worked additional hours to earn the money to learn to be a pilot and he was given the job because he got his pilot's licence. He was also a skilled radio operator and because of his merchant navy service in World War I, he was a skilled navigator. So he got a job with Qantas, as one of the early pilots. In those days, this is in 1934, '35, '36, they used to fly De

Havilland 86, a four engine aircraft carrying eight passengers from Brisbane to Singapore and they had something like 21 stops en route and it took them a whole week to get there. They had a week in Singapore where they met up with the Empire Flying Boat service from Britain, and the mail was exchanged and then they flew back again, another week. So he was away 3 weeks at a time. At that stage we had moved to Shorncliffe which is on Moreton Bay and I have to say that was the happiest time of my life. We lived there for two years and it was happy because it was beside the seaside. These days you look at Moreton Bay and you compare Moreton Bay with Jervis Bay where I had been living recently and there is no comparison. Moreton Bay is grubby and muddy and dirty and so on, but to me that was life, it was absolutely wonderful.

What made you particularly happy to be part of that environment as a child?

I guess a couple of things, one, it was a village atmosphere. The school that I went to at Shorncliffe, there were two rooms in the school and these two rooms had two teachers and they catered for everyone from Infants through to the sixth grade. Probably the total school population would have been 20, 22, something like that. So it was a small village atmosphere. And secondly, it was as I said, by the sea. That was marvellous. I learnt to swim there and at the age of eight I qualified, I have a certificate which I still have, saying that I swam 100 yards continuous by the same stroke:

Was this beach swimming or was there a swimming enclosure there?

Beach swimming, but also in qualifying for this it was a swimming pool at Sandgate. Now this swimming pool was constructed of suspended concrete with a pipe running out into Moreton Bay. The shelf of the seawater was very, very shallow. You could walk out perhaps 200, 300 metres and still be up to your waist, so the salt water was pumped into the suspended concrete pool, huge pool, 33 yards long, so to do the hundred yard swim I had to do three lengths of it. So yes, that was it, that

pool of course has long since gone. At the time also that we left, they were in the process of building a shark net enclosure at Shorncliffe. When I went back many years later to see this shark net enclosure it had been pulled down. It had deteriorated so much, so I never got to swim in that shark net enclosure.

It sounds as if as a child you did spend a lot of time on the beach?

Oh yes, every day, because to get to school I could go directly by the streets, or I could go indirectly, the long way round by the beach and of course I went by the beach everyday.

Were you a keen bodysurfer as well?

No, I didn't like surfing because I was brought up in the environment where there was no such thing as surf. I mean Brisbane is not far from Surfers Paradise but to get to Surfers Paradise you had to be rich. You had to have a car and I think in Shorncliffe I can remember one car being owned by the local shop owner, Mr Thompson. So surfing was like going across to the United States or England, it was impossible.

I believe you have memories of such things as the horse drawn baker's cart?

Oh yes, this happened when we went to Melbourne. I was fascinated; the very first day we were there, this is in East Malvern where we rented a house. We were approached, very politely, by three different manufactures of bread, bakers, and two dispensers of milk, milk carters. The bakers introduced themselves, the deliverymen introduced themselves, gave us samples of bread and recommended that we used their bakery. Similarly with the milk deliveries, we were given samples of milk and cream, little half pint bottle of milk and a little something or other of cream with firm recommendations that we should go to Kilpatrick's dairy for our milk. Of course when the war came a few years later that sort of thing was stopped entirely.

That seems to have been a much more personalised sort of world?

Oh, very civilised, very personalised and civilised. And the garbage man, I

remember the garbage man, two-wheeled dray, or I guess that's what you'd call it, drawn by a horse and the horse would plod along at a steady pace and the garbo would come and pick up the garbage and empty it into the dray as the horse went past. And the horse always knew when to stop, always new when to turn left, or turn right, very civilised.

Absolutely, absolutely, sounds like another world altogether.

It is.

Now you mentioned the Depression. What do you either remember of the Depression, or what do you remember people telling about the Depression and its impact?

Oh, a number of things I guess. One, the need to save all the food scraps to feed to the chooks, so the chooks would lay eggs that were edible so you didn't have to buy eggs. The need to grow your own vegetables so you didn't have to go and buy vegetables. The need to conserve the clothes and to remake the clothes. This was particularly useful in those families who had three or four children, hence the expression the "hand-me-downs". The fact that for entertainment it was all family type entertainment. To go to the theatre was really a night out, where you paid thruppence to sit on the hard seats, or you paid sixpence to sit in the canvas seats.

What sort of theatre were you seeing?

American made films of course, Charlie Chaplin was very popular ,and new stage and theatre screens like William Powell and Myrna Loy, names that people these days wouldn't know at all, but in those days they were very popular film people.

That's right, they were very popular in the Thin Man series?

Yes, yes, oh, you are showing your age, or you've read history?

I'm just a film buff. Do you have any memories of silent films? You referred to Chaplin, were the Chaplin films you were seeing silent?

No, all the films we saw that I can recall seeing were sound films

although you mentioned this, my wife Shirley, her father used to play the piano. He was a brilliant pianist, he could play anything, and his first job after he came back from the First World War was to play the piano for the silent theatres and he was doing this in Dubbo, where Shirley was born. And she used to sleep underneath his piano at night, while her mother was there looking after her and he was playing the piano. So no, that's my only association with the silent movies.

And I expect that you went along to children's matinees?

Yes, I remember one particular incident where I was given sufficient money to go by tram to the neighbouring suburb with my older brother and a friend of his. And as the tram approached the stop these big adult boys who must have been at least nine or ten at the time, got onto the running board of the tram and hopped off while the tram was still going. So of course me, five or six years old, had to do the same sort of thing. And I can remember this man grabbing me and holding me back and I was so incensed at this fellow stopping me getting off the tram. Just as well he did or I might have ended up with a broken neck.

And you are on your way to a children's matinee on that day?

On the way to a children's matinee, yes.

Just moving back to Queensland and this brings to mind your parents. What can you tell me about your parents and their backgrounds?

Okay, Mum was born in Melbourne to a middle class family. Her father was a senior officer with the Victorian Government at that time. The Victorian Government had a soldier settlement scheme, in fact a soldier settlement scheme for the First World War that was in operation. My grandfather, her father, was responsible for the administration of that in the State of Victoria, so it was a sort of a middle class family. Snobs, really. Cecily went to a private school, because they could afford that and she did the sort of things that young women do at private schools, learnt to play tennis, very physical, active, very aggressive women, learnt to

play tennis, played it well, and ended up in later years as one of the Queensland women champion singles players. So that was her background.

Cecily being your mother?

Cecily being my mother, yes.

Now you mentioned your father and his career and his career involvement from radio through to aviation. Can you give us a bit of a character description of your father?

Aloof, remote, deeply concentrated. If he wanted to do something he would focus on it to the exclusion of all outside interference. He wanted to become a radio operator. This is back in 1916 when he was still living in the lighthouses with his father. So, by correspondence he learnt to become a radio operator. H knew the Morse code because of the signalling, the light signalling that they used to do between the lighthouses and the ships. In later years he wanted to be a pilot so he learnt to become a pilot. He wanted to know how to navigate, he wanted to know how to navigate by the stars, celestial navigation so he did that. He was, as I say, a very intensely focused, remote sort of a man. Never knew him ever to put his arm around me and say, “G’day mate” or anything like that.

So what was his involvement in radio in Brisbane?

Well, because when he went to sea in a merchant ship in World War I, it was a troop carrier, travelling between Australia and England. He became very interested in wireless and became a very competent wireless operator, was seconded by the navy out of the merchant service into the navy, given a commission as a commissioned telegraphist, sent to the island of Samarai, which is off the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea. He was there and received the message from, the transmitted message from England of the Armistice and then re-transmitted that back to Australia.

So to connect this with what he was doing with radio in the radio

industry in Brisbane, are we talking about a broadcasting station are we?

Yes, talking about a broadcasting station because of his interest in radio. He was not only interested in the communication aspect but he was also interested in the technical aspect and in those days, of course, the radio transmitters were pretty primitive. They did have thermionic valves but they were very primitive, so it wasn't really too difficult for him to grasp the technical fundamentals to become competent in the design and maintenance of transmitters and receivers and that got him a job after the First World War with 4BC. He then went to Melbourne and worked in the same capacity with 3LO and then back to Brisbane and 4QG. And it was that, coupled with his knowledge of navigation and his desire to fly that got him, collectively those things, the job with Qantas Airways.

You mentioned, and you were talking about before we started recording his involvement and his father's involvement in lighthouses. Can you just tell us a bit about that?

Yes, my great grandfather, William Stevens, migrated to Australia in 1856. He had spent time in the Royal Navy, something like about eight years in the Royal Navy. Now family lore had it that he had been wounded in a battle somewhere. We have no evidence of this but by piecing together bits of information and history it seems that he might have been involved in the Crimean War which was 1853, '54. It is a fact that he had a wound that affected his leg. He was a very keen cricketer and whenever he played cricket he had another member of the team run for him when he hit the ball. So he came to Australia in 1856 and because of his naval background he very quickly scored a job as a lighthouse keeper on the Victorian lights. He stayed in the job as a lighthouse keeper on the Victorian lights until something like about 1897. His son, my grandfather, George Frederick Williams Stevens followed suit and he stayed with the lighthouses right through until almost the day he died in 1946. He retired in 1933 but then did relief lighthouse keeping duties for lighthouse keepers who were going on long service leave. Dad was born

and brought up in the lighthouses and spent the first 16 years of his life living the life of Riley, it really was. The only education he had was what was passed onto him by his mother or his father. Fishing, going out hunting for foxes or rabbits, with a rifle, that was his life. Until at the age of 16 his father said, “Right, I’ve had enough. You go out and support yourself. I’ve got you job as a telegraph messenger boy in Mornington.” And that’s how he left home. And interestingly in later years he told me he never really went back home. He visited frequently but because of his interest and association with all his activities he never returned home to live.

He sounds a truly remarkable man. Such a wide range of interests, and what a fascinating life.

One, many fascinating facts, and one of them is I have a photograph of him standing on top of the tower of the radio mast of one of the Brisbane radio stations 4QG or 4BC, either one. And you can imagine the huge steel tower with the bar across the top and the wires running off and there’s the photo of Dad standing on the top of this. Absolutely no fear of heights, and that must have been of interest and value to him as a pilot I guess.

And being up to great altitudes on lighthouses was probably a good conditioning too.

It possibly was to, but after he left Qantas he was offered the job in the Department of Civil Aviation in Melbourne and that’s when we left Brisbane to live in Melbourne. The war came along and he went into the air force as a communications officer and after the war he went back into the Department of Civil Aviation where he stayed until he retired. In the early part of the war, before he went into the air force he was asked by Lester Brain of Qantas fame and PG Taylor to go with them to San Diego to pick up one of the Catalinas. A number of Catalinas were built in San Diego and the Australian ones were flown back to Australia by Australian crews and he was the crew of one of the first Cats to come back. At the time they held the record for the longest airborne flight, 25 hours it took

them to fly from Suva to Sydney.

That was a big deal at the time wasn't it?

Oh, absolutely yes.

I think PG Taylor wrote about it later didn't he?

He did, yes.

In a book called *Frigate*?

Yes.

Tell us a bit about your mother's personality. You said she was very able at sports

but you also used the word "aggressive".

I don't think that I have met a more assertive, aggressive person in my life. There were two ways of doing something, Cecily's way and the wrong way. She made more enemies than friends and yet she had remarkable abilities. In her later life she developed an interest in flowers, in particular the species Lilium, and she in fact had bred and registered two hybrids of the Lilium, one is called Anzac Glory. She made a number of associations and friends in this capacity and in every case, after a very short space of time the personal relationship between Cecily and this person would deteriorate to the point where they parted company. My brother Dick married a second time in later life, a lovely woman, in Griffith. Dick brought Cecily to live in Griffith with him, not in the same house but in a retirement village, and the very first day he brought Cecily around to visit Dawn, his new wife. Cecily walked in the door, looked around and she said, "I don't like this, you'd have to change that." An astonishing women.

Did they change it?

No, Dawn, who was severely affected with poliomyelitis, and as a paraplegic just couldn't comprehend and couldn't cope with this.

I am trying to imagine Cecily in a lighthouse or in a lighthouse keeper's cottage.

No, Cecily was never in the lighthouses. Father had left the lighthouses at the age of 16. He was in 3LO Melbourne as a radio engineer when he met Cecily.

Oh, I see. So if we are to look at the formative influences on you who do you think was more influential in making you the character that you are?

Both my parents in their own ways were influential in as much as I reacted adversely to both of them. I am what I am largely because I disapproved of what they were. As I said, Cecily was very aggressive, couldn't relate with people and that used to worry me, "What's wrong, why is this women so angry. Why is she so offensive with this other person?" I thought that was unnecessary.

I mean it seems to me that you had your own strong sense of right and wrong and your own determination to create yourself.

Yes, yes, yes. I tell you one little incident about my father, as I said to you, he was remote. You might find this hard to believe but he was a cigarette smoker and I can recall as a small boy when we were living in Shorncliffe. I don't know how it came about, but my brother Dick was standing there, and Dad was standing there smoking and either one of them said that Dad could blow smoke from his eyes. I knew he could blow smoke from his mouth and his nose but he could blow smoke from his eyes. I said, "I don't believe this" and Dad said, "Yeah, I'll show you. Give me your hand," so he took my hand and he said, "Now, you look closely at my eyes," and I stand closely at his eyes and he gradually moved his cigarette towards my hand until it burnt me. Can you believe that. He thought it was funny, Dick thought it was funny. I thought it was painful. Interesting man.

You must have had a role model, some kind of sense of, or a person to provide you with some sense of right and wrong in life?

Possibly, it certainly wasn't my maternal grandfather. The fellow who was in the Victorian Government. And it certainly wasn't his wife, my

grandmother, she had Alzheimer's. It certainly wasn't my father's parents; they were living in Port Lonsdale in retirement at the time, he was supplementing his meagre lighthouse pension by growing vegetables and catching rabbits for food and pelts. Possibly it was the high school. I remember my first week at Melbourne Boys' High School and it's at Forest Hill, South Yarra with a big playing field and a big building in the background. I saw these superhero athletes, they must have been at least 15 or 16, the big boys, the seniors and they were doing track and field events. Running, sprinting, hurdling, throwing the javelin, and I thought, "This is what I am here for. This is life." For the next two years I was a part of that life, I felt that I had arrived. But then as I entered the fifth year of high school, in the very early days of 1945, Mum had taken off with a digger who had returned from the Middle East, met him in hospital. Dad was in New Guinea, my brother Dick had joined the army. He was in the 2/6 Commando Unit somewhere behind the Japanese lines in New Guinea. Grandma had Alzheimer's, Grandpa had his hands full and there was me, by myself , and my school. And I thought, "I've got to get out of this." So through family connections I met up with Captain John King who was the Director of Navigation for Victoria at the time. He got me a job as a deck boy on the lighthouse supply ship Cape York, and that's where I spent the next 15 months of my life, and that was high adventure, high adventure for a 16-year-old kid.

Just before we move onto that and that sounds very tantalising to go straight into that story. But what was it about your schooling and your other formative influences that made you able to be sufficiently independently minded away from the influence of your parents?

I don't know, probably something innate in me, maybe it was a section of that characteristic like I explained about Cecily. There are two ways that you do anything, her way and
the wrong way, and maybe that was it. I felt that what I was seeing in my family was the wrong way and I was going to do things my way. I don't know, I can't answer that. I'm not a psychiatrist or a psychologist.

I just, because it sounds as if you were really up against the odds there and I think that it is a very admirable thing that you have managed to pull free of it and become the person you are basically.

Well, looking back on it, yes, it was tough. There are times when I wondered which way was up but then I look at other people, and I read about them and I think I don't have problems compared with them.

Just getting back to World War II or getting back even further to World War I, did people that you knew talk about World War I?

Very, very little Shirley's father who I knew quite well for a number of years before he died was an artillery man in the 27th Field Artillery Brigade in the Somme Valley for almost all of, well, from the end of 1917 right through until well after the Armistice. He would not ever talk about World War I. Dad was a wireless operator on a troop ship. Occasionally he would tell a little bit of a story like once when they were returning home they had just passed through the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean and they were approached by a German raider, but because the ship they were on, the Wiltshire, had been built for the meat trade, a refrigeration ship, she was fast and she was empty returning home She was able to outpace the raider. That was just one little story he told me, but other than that, no.

I imagine World War II made much more of an impact on your life?

Oh yes, yes.

Do you remember where you were when you heard that World War II had broken out?

Yes, we were living in number 5 Forster Avenue, East Malvern, and I couldn't work out what all the shouting was about. The newspaper boy outside and all the neighbours out. "War is Declared," didn't mean a thing to me at the time. In a few years later I was part of it.

Now I gather you have memories of Americans being everywhere

during World War II. What specific memories do you have of the American, so-called invasion of Australia?

A number of things, travelling by electric train from Caulfield into Melbourne, passing the Melbourne Cricket Ground where the Americans were billeted and every time we went past on the train, even though it was perhaps three or four hundred metres away you would wave and you would always get a wave back. To us, the loudmouth swaggering behaviour of the American servicemen in the streets of Melbourne. The obvious tension between the Australian servicemen and the American servicemen when in uniform. The obvious affection that the young women would show for the American servicemen because of the fact that they had money, but more importantly, they were prepared to spend it. They were prepared to buy the girls a drink or a dress. Those sort of memories, observations, superficial perhaps but indicative of the relationship, the difficult relationship that existed between the Australian armed forces and the American armed forces at the time.

I believe there were open fights between American and Australian soldiers?

Oh yes, in fact there has been a book written about the Battle of Brisbane. You may have read it.

No I haven't actually, that sounds very interesting. I have heard of the Battle of Brisbane. Did you ever witness any open animosity?

Not that I can recall because being mainly, or being exclusively a schoolboy visiting the big city of Melbourne on rare occasions. No, I wouldn't have seen it. And of course those servicemen would not be seen in the suburbs, so no, I didn't see it.

How strongly did you feel about whether these American servicemen had the right, or didn't have the right to be swaggering and particularly paying attention to Australian women?

Oh, I was highly incensed and we are important people in our own right

and who are these invaders to come and show us and tell us what to do. Fiercely loyal. What's Germaine Greer's word, "chauvinistic"? The true meaning of chauvinism; fiercely loyal. That's how I felt, regardless of the circumstances that created it.

Did other people that you knew express an opinion of the Americans in Australia?

Yes, and most of them would tend to agree with what was my opinion, which in fact of course was influenced by the older people. But most Australians, ordinary suburban people that I came in contact with had a similar opinion. We need them here to help protect Australia, but I wished to God that they would go home.

So, in a sense they were seen as a bit of a necessary evil.

Yes, very much so.

Now you mentioned that your mother went off with another man. Can you tell us a bit about what happened there?

Well, as I said, Dad was in the air force in New Guinea away from home. I suspect that the marriage breakdown had started a lot earlier because of his continued absences from home. First of all when he was flying for Qantas, then when he was in the Department of Civil Aviation, he had responsibilities for communication networks within civil aviation right around Australia. So he was frequently away from home. He was, as I said, a remote sort of a man. I can't imagine why any women would want to marry him. So, the marriage breakdown probably occurred a lot earlier. Mum also, despite the fact that she was a very aggressive woman was quite gregarious in her tennis playing. She belonged to a number of clubs and there were always parties. They were incompatible. So the ground was set and I think she was consciously or subconsciously looking for a soul mate and she found this fellow in hospital, David, he had been in the Middle East. I don't think he was wounded but he had suffered malaria of the bowel because of the living conditions there, the flies and the sand. And he was hospitalised home and somehow she met him at the

hospital and they got together thereafter.

How was it that she came to meet him in hospital?

She had a friend, neighbour, living by who was very active in visiting hospitals, bringing cheer, and flowers and chocolates to the wounded Diggers and she took Cecily along one day and it just happened that they met David that day and they clicked.

Did the fact that your mother formed an association, and obviously went off to spend some time with David. Did that have an impact on you?

Oh yes, yes. That was one of the main reasons why I quit home. I couldn't reconcile the fact of her abdicating her responsibilities to the marriage vows. I am a person who believes that we make a commitment to do something, then regardless, you do it. Our marriage for example as of the 16th of this month would have lasted 50 years, coming up for our golden wedding. I believe that if I have an agreement with you to do something, then I will honour that agreement, and the marriage vows is one of those. I disapprove of the proliferation, the propensity of young people these days, to enter into then breakaway from their marriage responsibilities because of the affect it has on children. It had a very profound affect on me, adverse affect. But I have overcome that now. But I can see it. I saw it in a child this week. A friend of one of my grandsons. The father decided that he didn't want to live with the wife and three children so he's gone off to America. She's got to support the children by going to work in a real estate agent. I can see that this is having an adverse affect on that child. I'm rambling I know, I don't know if I am answering your question?

Well, no this is you expressing your point of view which is part of the interview and that's entirely valid and entirely appropriate to what we are doing, so that's fine.

So I have never really forgiven her for that. No marriage and I mean no marriage is perfect. There is always instances where

one party will criticise the other validly or maybe not validly but that is a minor thing in the overall picture. The overall picture is a stable family. You see, if you have a stable family and that stable family is repeated throughout the whole nation, you have a stable nation. You have a strong and powerful nation.

Can you be more specific about how your parents marriage break-up affected you?

I just didn't want to live at home. I didn't want to have my friends know about the marriage break-up. I didn't want to be associated with them. When my father died it was just like the old bloke down the road died. "Oh yeah, so he's died." And when my mother died my brother Dick rang up and I said, "So be it." I lost all affection for both of them.

As a result of the marriage break-up?

As a result of the marriage break-up, yeah. And I vowed and declared that that would never happen in my family. We are a strong family. Our son Matthew married to Linda, two lovely little boys. Daughter Jenny, married to John, two lovely little boys. Jenny lives just around the corner here in Berowra Heights, Matthew lives in Thornleigh. We are a strong, close-knit family and we are going to stay that way.

Just getting back to other memories that you might have had of that World War II period. What were some of the other outward and visible forms of World War II that you noticed and remembered to this day?

I guess because my brother Dick was in the army, wherever possible, I tried to keep knowledgeable of what the army was up to and what it was doing. Whether it was in the Middle East, whether it was in New Guinea, whether it was in Borneo. And wherever I would see a solider in uniform I'd feel proud. I am part of that thing, whatever that thing is. Not so much the navy surprisingly, because I ended up in the navy. And not so much because of the air force because Dad was in the air force. Maybe it was because of my feelings for Dad that I tended to regard the air force as

another thing. So I guess my prime interest was in the army, because of my brother Dick. He was to me a superhero. Physically, he was a very big man, well over six feet, broad, strong, commanding appearance, compared with me, a little fellow. So going back to one of your earlier questions, maybe Dick's influence had something to do with the way I am. And again I haven't answered your question.

I'm just wondering, we will get back to Dick in a moment. Were there as such any outward forms of the affect of World War II, such as austerity that you noticed?

Oh, yes, yes, we had rationing, we had petrol rationing. I remember seeing cars with the gas producer device, a mechanical device about as big as a medium sized gas cylinder, liquid petroleum gas cylinder mounted on the rear bumper bar, burning coke to produce gas to fire the engine in the car. Some of them with big inflatable bags on the roof of the car to hold the gas. The food and clothes rationing books where if you wanted a pound of butter you had to have so many coupons cut out of the book with the scissors by the grocer. If you wanted wool or cotton clothes so many coupons were cut, and of course the black market that operated.

How much were you aware of the black market?

Superficially, but I was aware of it when a friend visited Cecily and gave her a counterfeit book.

Are we talking about a counterfeit ration book?

A counterfeit ration book, yes. Now how common that was I don't know. But it existed.

Did Cecily go on to use that counterfeit ration book?

I imagine she did, I don't know.

How did you know it was counterfeit?

She told me.

Cecily told you it was counterfeit?

Yeah, yeah.

And she had no problems about using it?

No problems whatsoever. Her rationale was, “Everyone else is doing it so why shouldn’t I?” No principles about it.

You mentioned the fact that you felt very patriotic. Other people that we have interviewed have spoken of their love of, and their loyalty for the Empire. How much did the Empire play, a British Empire play a role in your life?

Interesting question that because in those days I fervently believed there were two classes of people in the world, the British and those who wished they were. A bit of tongue in cheek there. Nowadays in our family we are polarised, Shirley is a fierce monarchist and I’m a fierce republican.

Looking back in the context of the 1930s and 1940s it seems to me you were very proudly Australian, but where did the British Empire come into all this?

Oh, we were part of the British Empire. We were as much part of the British Empire as we were a part of Australia. We were Australians but we were British. And that included other dominions like South Africa, New Zealand, India.

Just returning to your brother. He seems to have been very much a role model for you?

Yes.

And he was your older brother, he was almost five years older than you.

I was told later in life that I was a result of a reconciliation after a fight between my mother and father.

Did you have any other brothers and sisters?

No. Father married again and I do have living in Brisbane a half brother. We communicate spasmodically, we are good friends but there is no personal relationships there at all.

At what stage in your life did you find out that you were a result of

a reconciliation.

When my father's second wife told me one day. And you can imagine how that made me feel.

How did that make you feel?

Bloody awful. I am a result of an accident. She didn't have to tell me, why did she have to tell me? But she did.

It sounds like Dick was almost a parental figure as well as a role model for you?

Yes, and this happened in later life too. Before he died he was very much wanting to continue an association with me. He lived in Griffith. At the time we lived in Greenwich, a suburb of Sydney here. We would have frequent communication, every couple of weeks, phone-call, letter, that sort of thing.

You mentioned that he was enlisted in the army. And yet you ended up doing maritime things. Why was this?

Partly because of the ancestral influence, the lighthouses. But partly because it was an easy escape route from home. Here was this job being offered where I could get away from home immediately, like in the next couple of days.

Could we talk through, and you may have covered a little of this before, but if we could revisit how it was you were offered this job, and just talk us through the process of you getting involved and what the job actually was?

Yes, I mentioned before that the man that brought this about was Captain John King, who was the Director of Navigation in Victoria and he was a personal friend of my grandfather, George Frederick William, who was the lighthouse keeper, and also known to my Dad. It was through Dad giving me a contact with John King, that I went in to visit him in his office in Melbourne, on spec. And told him that I wanted to go to sea. And he said, "Well it just so happens that we have a vacancy on the lighthouse supply ship Cape York, for a deck boy." There were three lighthouse

supply ships servicing the whole of Australia, and Cape York had the responsibility for the Victorian lights, South Australian lights and the Tasmanian lights. These are the lights that are difficult to access. Offshore islands and otherwise almost impossible to access by land.

Now the answer maybe obvious but can you tell me the duties of a lighthouse supply ship actually are?

Yeah. The light in the lighthouse was driven by kerosene, had done so for many years, and it was important that those lights had supplies of kerosene. Some of them also were driven by an acetylene gas, so the lighthouse supply ship had to carry 24 gallon drums, not 44 gallon drums because they were too heavy for us to handle, 24 gallon drums of kerosene, and cylinders, I don't know what the cylinders weighed, maybe 40 or 50 kilograms of acetylene gas, so they were the prime requirements. They also had to carry petrol in drums, to drive the generators to create the electricity for use. They also had to carry food for the occupants and food for the livestock because in some of these attended lights they might have communication once a fortnight by fishing boat that would bring mail, otherwise all the supplies for the operation of the light and the families, and typically they'd be three families, three lightkeepers, all had to come via the lighthouse supply ship. And we would visit a light on average once every, about 3 months I suppose.

Now presumably there was a period of training before, or was it training on the job?

Training on the job.

So somehow by me asking you for a definition of the role of the supply ship we have leapt right into the story, but could you give us a bit more of a chronology about what happened when you were recruited for this job? Could you talk about joining presumably the company then going out on your first?

It was, compared with joining the navy at a later time, almost 10 years

later, it was so simple, it's not true. One day, the Friday, I was at school, the next day, the Monday I was on the ship and we were sailing out through the heads in Port Philip Bay and from then on I learnt the hard way, what to do. There were four deck boys and we used to take it in turn week about to be Peggy. Now Peggy's job was to look after the seamen crew. Peggy had to get the food from the galley for each meal and tidy up in the mess afterwards. Peggy had to scrub out the seaman's quarters each day and those were menial tasks but they had their advantage. Peggy always had the best of the food that was available. Peggy could always have the afternoon off when all the others were working. So there were some advantages to it. That only happened once every four weeks.

Now I'm very intrigued, why was this position called Peggy?

Peggy is a female name and those menial tasks were rightly the prerogative of women, the second class citizen. You know you've heard of these creatures.

There maybe some debate about this later.

So that's how the name Peggy came about.

How did you feel about applying the name Peggy to yourself.

Wasn't particularly impressed, but it didn't worry me. I mean it wasn't me that was Peggy, but there were three others who took it in turns. So it didn't worry me.

I imagine occasionally that this was the source of some humour?

Only when I would be back from a trip. The trip would last probably six weeks then I would come back and we would replenish stores and I would meet up with some of my old school chums and I would "lord" it around you know, "I'm away fighting the war and you guys are still at school." So those are the only occasions when it would come up. And I would studiously avoid mentioning the word Peggy. I would focus on the other duties that I had.

I was wondering about that. Now you have just mentioned the war effort, so you saw what you were doing as contributing to the war

effort?

Oh very much so yes, because we had security passes to get on board ship at Williamstown. There were armed guards on the wharf. The ship was always blacked out at night. On the stern of the ship we had a gun, I think it must have been a World War I leftover, but it was quite a substantial looking thing. I don't know what the calibre would be, maybe 3 inch, and around the poop deck where the gun was mounted there were the magazines with the shells and the cordite packages. The gunner was a naval seaman, ex World War I. Funny old fella, Bill Bridgeman. Twice we had Japanese submarine scares while we were at sea. I used to fantasise about what I would do when we were attacked by a Japanese submarine. But in later years I realised that the Jap's would not attack us because they relied on the lighthouses operation as much as any other ship did. So they would not destroy us. They might of necessity want the food that we carried, they might of necessity want some of the fuel that we carried, but it was unlikely because the submarines were powered by diesel fuel and we carried furnace fuel oil to burn in the boilers on the ship, and the petrol and kerosene and the acetylene for the lighthouses. So it was unlikely that they would have attacked us for that reason, and they certainly wouldn't have sunk us.

How confident were you that the Japanese would know what the purpose of your ship was?

Oh, very confident. Both opposing forces, the Axis countries, Japan, Germany, the Allies all knew down to the last detail: descriptions, names, tonnage, capability, speed, of every vessel. They knew, yeah.

So it must have been a very good feeling of confidence to know that what you were doing was essential?

Oh well, I didn't realise that until later years. As I said I used to fantasise about what I would do when we were attacked. In later years coming with maturity, I realised that they wouldn't attack us, they relied on us.

So on an average journey how apprehensive were you about the

possibility of attack?

Not very apprehensive. You see the routine of the ship would be to service the lighthouse. I will talk later about how we did that, but we would be in close proximity to the light, in relatively shallow water, or in a secure anchorage. So the possibility of an attack by a submarine was fairly remote at night time. In the day time we were vulnerable because we'd be—. Sorry, in the night time we were vulnerable because we were travelling between lights. We would service a light and then at the end of day's work we'd travel, sail to the next light, so that's when we were vulnerable at night time. That's why the ship was blacked out when we were travelling, but in the daytime at safe anchorage unlikely.

You have given us a bit of a description of the armaments of the ship. Can you give us more of an overall description of the ship itself including its size?

I could even show you a photograph.

We'll have a look at that later, but for the sake of whatever audience this is, just give us a description of the ship.

Gross tonnage, precisely 1406 tons. Small ship. Crew, in total, possibly 34, 35, which is a lot for a small ship like that, but necessary because of the cargo handling and the method of cargo handling at the lights. Typically in those days what was called a three island ship. Now if you can imagine you are looking at the side of the ship, there is the bow of the stem and there is the stern and in between there is the island of the bridge and the living quarters. And in between the bow and the bridge there is a dip if you like, where the hold is, the foreign hold. Between the aft end of the island and the poop deck there is another dip where the after hold was. So a three island ship. An almost vertical stem as you look at the side, a straight stem and a counter stern. A counter stern meaning that instead of going down into the water like modern ships do we would go down and curve left before it went down. Old style of ship. It had masts and derricks, derricks being the devices that substituted for the work of cranes, modern ships have cranes these days. So, that's a

description of the ship. Gross tonnage as I said 1406 tons net, cargo carrying capacity I think was something like 340 tons.

What were the conditions for both living and working aboard this ship?

For those days very good. The four deck boys had a cabin of their own with two double bunks, and the seaman had three cabins with four double bunks in each. As I said, typically a ship that size would probably carry no more than six seaman, two per watch, three watches, but because of the need for working hands to do the cargo work we had double that number.

And how was the ship fuelled?

She used to burn, there was a triple expansion reciprocating engine. That means that its steam driven, and the production of steam was by furnaces which burnt furnace fuel oil. The oil would be injected under pressure into the furnace and ignited. I was surprise the first time a saw it to see the hole, the size of the hole through which the furnace fuel was injected, and it was probably no more, a circular hole, no more than a millimetre in diameter. So the furnace fuel oil would be pumped under pressure, ignited, heat the water, turn to steam. The steam would then go into the first cylinder, which was like a car cylinder, but a lot bigger where it would exert the pressure on the gears, which would turn the propeller shaft. The steam would then go into the second cylinder, which was a lot bigger. Why was it bigger? Because the steam expands when it’s used and then into the third cylinder, the big one, triple expansion.

Thanks for that description, that’s something that is going to be very useful to technology historians etcetera in the future, and anyone who is into shipping I suppose.

A reciprocating engine, as I said, as opposed to a turbine, where reciprocating is meaning backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards.

What was the name of the ship?

Cape York, there were three lighthouse supply ships, us, Cape York for

South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania. There was Cape Moreton, I think was the other one, and Cape Leeuwin which was the third one. They were subsequently replaced, probably in the early 1950s by three others, which again have subsequently been replaced by one ship, which is under contract now to the Australian Lighthouse Service. The rest of the time it chases ships in the southern ocean that are fishing for the Patagonian "what's a name" fish. Can't think of the name of the vessel. Southern Aurora, Southern Cross, Southern something or other.

It must have been fairly liberating for you to get away from the home front and suddenly have a sense of freedom. How did that feel for you?

Absolutely wonderful. I was with a group of young boys, we were all 16, 17, 18 with common interests. The crew were old salts, too old to go to the war, average age was probably 45, 50. The officers, there were three deck officers and the captain were interested in the boys and frequently we would be sat in the corner and given instruction on ship handling, fundamentals of navigation, the effects of wind, tide, currents on ship movements. Every now and again we would be sent to the wheel house to take control of the ship. Learnt to box the compass. The old seamen took an interest in us showing us how to tie knots, tie hitches, splice ropes. It was a good life. Exciting.

Now you have mentioned various crew members. Can you talk us through how many crew there were and maybe talk about some of the key personalities there?

Yes, okay. The skipper was Captain Claire. Interesting man, he had a funny habit of using the "Eh." "Mr Mac"—Mackenzie was the first mate —"Mr Mac, we will turn to tomorrow morning eh, at 07:00, all hands having had had breakfast, eh, and number two, second, he'll go ashore on the first boat eh, and you'll take the second boat, eh."

Sounds like verbal equivalent of the rising inflection.

Yeah. So that was the skipper. The chief engineer, I think he must have

been about 170 years old. Little wizened man, hunched shoulders, sparkling eyes, a Scot. He had an unending repertoire of stories. Funny little man. The bo'sun was a big man, Eric Mussared. Eric shared a cabin with the carpenter and he hated it. He was a person of importance, he was the supervisor of the seaman, second to the captain in his opinion. The carpenter, Ernie Cooper, he was a tradesman. But he had to share the cabin with him. One of the jobs of the Peggy was each day, to go down to the bo'sun's quarters and get his orders for the particular food that he wanted. He wanted ketchup. "Mind you, ketchup, I don't want any of this muck they called sauce." It had to be ketchup. As you walked out of the door Ernie the carpenter would grab you and say, "Get some tomato sauce too." Now these provisions came from the Chief Steward. I think the Chief Steward to the day he died had records of every item he ever issued on every day to every deck boy. A meticulous record keeper. Funny man. Who else did we have? There were only six stokers, as opposed to the twelve seamen, because all the stokers had to do was to keep the engine running. And there was nothing special that I remember about them. But yeah, Eric Mussared, the bo'sun, Ernie Cooper, Captain Claire.

Was Captain Claire a good captain?

I'd say he was. He was certainly a good seaman. He knew the coastline like the back of his hand. He never had to refer to a chart. If we were leaving Wilson's Promontory heading for Cliffy Island he knew precisely which direction to steer. He knew when we would need to leave Swan Island, for example to get to Deal Island, without having reference to anyone, or any thing, or any chart, or any timetable, or any tide movements. Yeah, I would say he was a good seaman.

There seems to have been quite a good camaraderie and mateship among the crew?

There was, yes, the captain of course being the captain would hold himself aloof and remote as much as he could from the others. But the first mate, McKenzie, and the second mate and on the occasions that we

would have a third mate, and the wireless operator, they were all friendly, they would all stop and talk.

And did you have good sea legs? Did you ever get seasick?

Interesting, for the whole of my years in the merchant navy and the navy the very first day at sea I would feel very uncomfortable, but thereafter no matter how rough it got, no problem at all.

Did you regard the sea as a friend, or an enemy?

Oh, something to be very careful of. Never to trust. Always respect it. I despair of some of these people these days who go to sea from places near where I used to live, Kiama, Gerringong, Jervis Bay, in cockle shell aluminium dinghies with an outboard motor, and they are swamped by the sea, or turned over by the wind. They have no concept of the tremendous power of the sea. So 100 per cent unabiding, unequivocal respect for the sea.

What were the main waters that you sailed in aboard this ship?

Okay, from Port Philip Bay, west to the …

This is in the lighthouse ship?

Yes. West, to the eastern end of the Great Australian Bite, from Port Philip Bay east to Cape Everard, Gabo Island, literally all around Tasmania, as far south as Maatsuyker Island, which is a little island right to the very south of Tasmania.

Okay, so George, perhaps we could start off this next tape by you describing how you would drop the supplies off to the lighthouses?

Well, as I said before the seaman crew on the lighthouse supply ship was typically double on what you might find on a ship that size, and the reason is that all of the goods had to manhandled quite literally manhandled ashore. Now the ship carried four large motorboats. So we would arrive at a lighthouse typically say 6 o’clock in the morning. Two of the motorboats would be lowered over the side and the hatches either the forward or the after hatch, depending where the goods were stowed in

the ship, were located, would be opened. The derricks which are the cranes in those days would be rigged and two of the crew, two of the seaman crew, would go down into the hold with cargo nets or whatever else was necessary to load the gear. They would put the gear to be offloaded into the cargo nets. The hook would come down from the derrick and lift the cargo net up under the direction of the bo'sun. The bo'sun would direct two other seamen who were on the winches. One winch would lift the cargo net out of the hold. The other winch would take over via the second derrick and swing the cargo net over the side of the ship and then that winch would take control and lower the cargo net into the motor boat. In the motor boat were two other people, typically an able seaman who was the coxswain, and the bowhand which was one of the deck boys. And this was the exciting part of the job as a 16 year old. The motor boat would then, once it was loaded proceed to where the goods would be unloaded. Now in good cases like at Swan Island for example, off the Tasmanian coast, there would be a wharf, and the motor boat would come alongside the wharf. And on the wharf would be two more seamen with a hand winch and they would manually unwind the winch, so the hook would come down into the motor boat, pick up the cargo net and they would wind the winch, the hand winch, to lift the cargo net and then manually swing the boom of the lift and then drop the cargo net onto the wharf. So that process was fairly standard, simple, straightforward under good weather conditions.

On Maatsuyker Island, which I mentioned previously, you never had good weather conditions. There was always strong wind, always a surge of the waves and it was an interesting experience. First of all getting the gear into the boat along side the ship because the boat would be rising and falling. The ship would be rolling and it was even more exciting getting the goods out of the boat because the boat would be surging backwards and forwards on the waves alongside the wharf. Interesting experience. There were other occasions when it was even more exciting. For example, in those places where there was no wharf we had to get the gear ashore by other means. Now the classic case in point was Tasman Island.

Tasman Island is on the southeast coast of Tasmania. It is a very big island in terms of height but not very big in terms of area. Probably at the top the area would be three or four hectares. Height above sea level, getting close to a thousand feet. Now I want you to imagine you are looking east at the coast of Tasmania and you are looking at Cape Pillar. Cape Pillar is again about a thousand feet high and separating Cape Pillar from Tasman Island is an expanse of water, which might be, at the most, a kilometre, perhaps three quarters of a kilometre. Between Cape Pillar and Tasman Island is a rock protruding out of the water by perhaps 20 or 30 feet. Distance from Tasman Island by perhaps 200 metres at the most. On the side of the sheer cliff of Tasman Island, 80 feet above the water there was a landing constructed, right into the side of the cliff. Now I want you to imagine you are standing on this landing and there is a tripod, a strong tripod mounted on the landing and from the top of this tripod running down at an angle of about 45 degrees is a heavy steel wire which is anchored into this rock. Now on this steel wire is a pulley and on the bottom of this pulley is a large basket, a wicker basket that can hold quite comfortably four adults. Now imagine you are standing on this landing, 80 feet above the water. You step into the basket which is lifted vertically two or three feet so it clears the deck and the railing of the landing. It then runs on the pulley, at an angle of 45 degrees down the steel wire until it hits a stop, a mechanical stop that's bolted to the wire. The basket is then lowered vertically towards the water. So the motor boat coming from Cape York which is lying off the island two or three hundred metres, proceeds with the gear; 24 gallon drums of fuel, the acetylene, cylinders of gas, the food, the clothing, proceeds and stations itself underneath the basket. It's rising and falling on the waves, it's being moved occasionally by the wind, it's being moved by the current and the skill of the coxswain is to position the boat such that the skill of the operator on the landing can lower the basket close to, but not right on top of the boat. Then the skill of the deck boy comes in. He has to manhandle these items into the basket so that the basket is then lifted vertically up to the wire, then 45 degrees up to the landing, and then

down onto the landing where it is unloaded manually and put into a flying fox. The flying fox is a railway that goes up the side of Tasman Island at an angle of at least 70 degrees, almost a thousand feet up to the top. Now in good weather that's fine. On those occasions when you have live cargo, like a sheep, it gets even more difficult. Chooks, easy to handle, put them in a crate, lift them into a basket and away they go. Sheep, they seem to have 16 legs kicking each time. But the worst situation is when you have a cow or a horse. Now the way to get the cow or a horse ashore is to build a pontoon. You have two empty 24, 44 gallon empty drums supported by a couple of transverse pieces of timber and the horse is lowered into the water, lashed to these two pieces of timbers which is supported by the drums so that the horse is in the water, but is not supporting itself. That then is towed by the motorboat to wherever it has to go, and again if you are going to a place like Wedge Island in the Great Australian Bite, then you can take the horse to the shore, unshackle it and it can run up the beach. But when you are going to a place like Tasman Island and you have to get this poor wretched horse up 80 feet, it's a work of art.

So how did you get the horse up?

Well lift it, leave it in its cradle and lift the cradle. The horse is lifted in the cradle. You take the basket off and lift the cradle with the horse in it. Fortunately we only had to do that sort of thing twice. But most of the islands it was relatively straightforward. They either had a beach where you could do that sort of thing, or they had a landing where it could be done. And of course the humans, they had to travel the same way. It must have been fun for the women, getting out of the ship, into the motor boat, floating up and down, into the basket, being lifted into the flying fox, up a thousand feet. Lighthouse keeper families I think deserve medals for the trials and tribulations they had to put up with. Men, you expect that, women and children, it makes it difficult. Although when the children get to the age of us deck boys, it's high adventure, it's excitement, it's fun.

That's remarkable.

Yes. Now when the weather was really bad, particularly around the Tasmanian coast, we had to shelter. Many times I've been into Wine Glass Bay; now I don't know if you have been to Wine Glass Bay as a tourist; absolutely gorgeous, the most spectacular perfect looking expanse, crescent shaped expanse of white sand and crystal clear blue water. Absolutely beautiful. Either that or we'd go into Port Arthur. Many is the time I have been into Port Arthur as a boy; in those days Port Arthur was just the ruins of a penal settlement. There was no commercialisation, nothing, and you could walk among the ruins, you could wonder around Dead Island quite freely. Nowadays, of course, you can't do that.

What was the morale like on board?

Oh high, very high. We were all working as a team towards a common end and we knew that what we were doing was of benefit to other people, benefit to the lighthouse keepers and their families. Either getting them gear, food and so on, or either bringing them ashore, bringing them onto the ship so they could go back home.

Now you've obviously mentioned the extraordinary feat of taking supplies to that particular lighthouse that you mentioned before. Were there any other tricky lighthouse supply drop offs?

Yes, Citadel Island, which is just off the south coast of Victoria on the eastern side. An unmanned light, no landing whatsoever, and what we had to do there was to wait for the weather to be fine. We would then bring the motor boat up to the rock, there was no beach at all, just bare rock. Bring the motor boat up to the beach, sufficiently close so that the bough hand could jump onto the rock, get his feet wet of course. Take the painter, which is the name given to the rope, the bough rope, and to hold the boat sufficiently forward whilst the coxswain would put the boat engine slowly into reverse so that it had the opposing forces of the motor pulling the boat back and the bough hand pulling the boat forward to keep the boat relatively stationery, relative to the rock regardless to the water movement. We would always have a third hand then who would get out of the boat, stand up to his waist or knees and manhandle the goods

out. Now that's okay if the things are light, but most of the goods at Citadel island were simply the acetylene gas cylinders which stood about five feet tall, were probably about, at the most, 15 inches diameter and weighed 40 or 50 kilograms. That was hard work, and having got them out then the bough hand and the third man would then manhandle, drag, carry, pull, these gas cylinders up to the light, which fortunately wasn't very far up the hill, maybe 100 yards, 200 yards up the hill, but the hill was fairly steep, while the coxswain stood off in the boat waiting for us to return. We would then, having got the cylinders up the top, disconnect the existing cylinders, place the new ones in position, connect them up, test that the system worked, that the gas flowed and then drag the empty cylinders down the hill and repeat the process in reverse getting them back into the boat. So that was one. Cape Forestier on the east coast of Tasmania, north of Tasman Island was another quite difficult one where you couldn't actually get ashore. What you had to do was to lift the goods out of the boat while standing in the shallow water and manhandle them ashore. And then again manhandle them up this steep hill until you got to the light. Fortunately Cape Forestier is now out of action and they built another lighthouse a little bit further north, about seven or eight kilometres further north. That's serviced by the road. So those days of tough manhandling fortunately are gone. Tasman Island these days, which used to take us and the whole ship even in good weather two days, can be done now as an unattended light, by helicopter in a matter of an hour or so.

So how long would be, you just mentioned two days. How long would a typical drop of supplies take?

Well, if we left Melbourne for the southern run which was the south east of Victoria and Tasmania. That whole run might take five or six weeks. If the weather was good we could do a light in one day. If the weather was bad we might sit there in safety for perhaps five or six days. And that was when we had fun. Fishing, and getting crayfish. I despair these days when I see these poor little crayfish in the fish shops. In those days we would stop overnight somewhere because of the bad weather put the crayfish

nets over the side having caught a couple of kingfish first and cut their heads off as bait. Pull up the crayfish nets in the morning and throw out crayfish that were 3 times the size of these poor little things you see in the fish shops now. Crayfish, even with the tail curled, from the eyes back to the tail curl, 18 inches, that was what we would keep. We'd cook them, break the tail off put the tail in the ships freezer so that when we got back home we'd have lots of nice crayfish to eat. We'd also eat those that were cooked on board too.

Sounds like you ate like kings.

Oh, we did, we did. Even though it was during wartime we had good food. There was always butter, there was ham on Sundays. The main meal of the day was at lunchtime and there was always a roast with three vegetables. We ate exceedingly well.

You are making me hungry.

You'll have to wait, I'm afraid.

Now you mentioned that there was a couple of times, you thought there was Japanese nearby. Could you tell us about those experiences?

Well there's not much to tell. It was one Sunday the first incident and being the deck boys we had the afternoon off, sitting on the poop deck under the gun and all of a sudden I noticed that the wake of the ship instead of running astern of us, was turning. We turned around and hot footed it back to where we had come from and we wanted to know why. We asked the bo'sun who asked the first mate who asked skipper and he said, "There's been a scare of a submarine and we're not going to take any risks so we are going to hide," which we did. I mentioned earlier on that the most vulnerable time we experienced was night time but this was in broad daylight. And the other occasion was at night. We were steaming between two lights and there was no alarm system on the ship but all of a sudden the bo'sun poked his nose into our quarters and he said, "Get your life jackets out, get ready, there's a scare." But that was the closest

we ever came to it.

How real was the fear of being attacked by the Japanese?

For us youngsters, deck boys it was almost as though we hoped we would be attacked. More excitement. But for the older fellows who knew what it was about they were most apprehensive, most apprehensive, as I would be these days in that sort of situation.

Now doing these drops every three months to these different lighthouses, I imagine that the people that you were making these deliveries to would have been very enthusiastic about seeing some fresh faces about the place?

Oh, absolutely, yes. Particularly the women folk and the children of the keepers we'd bring off to go home. They'd always bring us presents, and these presents would be farm produce. Particularly eggs, duck eggs, chook eggs, cakes that they'd made. We were really welcome. It made you feel good.

I imagine that they would also be craving news?

No, because they had good wireless communication. Most of it was by Morse of course, because radio telephony in those days was not very advanced. But, yes, they new what was happening, what was going on around the world.

And you've mentioned your three other deckhand mates. What were they like?

One of them Spike, I can't remember his surname, was the son of one of the stokers, and that was a funny experience. Spike and his dad, each day they would see each other. The stokers slept on the starboard side, down below. The seamen slept on the port side down below and each day Spike and his dad would see each other and they would just nod. And that was the only communication throughout the whole day. Fascinating. Another one was Ray White. He ended up a real estate agent in Hobart. I don't think it was the Ray White we know about but an interesting little sideline here. About eight years ago now, Shirley and I had a holiday in

Queensland and Townsville of course, you have to go to Townsville if you can fight your way through all the Japanese tourists. One day we went on a trip on a boat, a big boat twin hull thing out to one of the islands. And in inevitable fashion as we left, I went up to the wheelhouse to supervise, to make sure the coxswain knew what he was doing. I looked at this fella and I said, “I know your face.” A young fellow in his early twenties, and to make conversation with me he said, “I hope you’re not feeling seasick.” I said, “No, I never get seasick, many years at sea.” “In fact,” I said, “I started off as a deck boy on a little ship in the Bass Strait. A lighthouse supply ship.” He looked at me and said, “My dad was on the lighthouse supply ship.” And I said, “Was his name? Ray White?” He said, “Yes!” How about that for a coincidence.

Fantastic.

And the other one was Nick, Don Nicholls. Now Don was every young woman’s epitome of what a man should be. Don was tall, well built. He had crinkly sparely eyes, he had crinkly black hair, he had the most gorgeous charm and personality you could ever think of. He had pimples, but the girls just ignored those. So those were my contemporaries.

Now did you get up to much mischief with your other deckhands?

There wasn’t the opportunity, more importantly perhaps there wasn’t the motivation. The worst mischief we got up to was once when we were in Williamstown waiting to go to sea the next day. Ray White said to me, “Lets go up the pub.” And I said, “We can’t go up the pub, I’m too young.” He said “Come on, let’s go up the pub.” So we went up the pub and had two glasses of beer, and I was “stonkered” on two glasses of beer. But in those days Williamstown was bustling. Full of ships, naval establishments, naval police, pubs. Down at Williamstown there was Williamstown, North Williamstown, Williamstown Pier and something or other else Williamstown. And I think there was something like 18 pubs. Nowadays you might be lucky to find one. But in terms of getting up to mischief, no. We were probably a bit more sophisticated than youngsters these days. For example one of the things we did in Hobart was we pooled our money

and hired a car with a driver and went up Mount Wellington. Now can you imagine four young men doing that these days? “Boring!” Another time in Adelaide we went to the Mission for Seamen. The Mission for Seamen still exists and it’s a church run activity, interdenominational, and its run for the benefit of foreign seaman visiting Australia. And you can go there and you have communion, if that’s what you want. You can have a light meal, you can play table tennis, you can talk to the duty pastor about any problems you might have. So those were the sort of things that we did. No mischief.

Now, what happened when you came to leave the lighthouse supply ship?

Yes, the war had finished.

Before we get onto that then. How did you, what do you recall of the end of the war?

I was in Adelaide for VE [Victory in Europe] Day. And that was the most subdued celebration I’ve ever seen I think. Adelaide in those days was known as the City of Churches and I think that about 99.99 per cent of the population in celebration of the end of the European war went to church. As opposed to VP [Victory in the Pacific] Day or VE Day in Sydney where everyone went wild in the streets as you might have seen from historic records. Totally different reaction.

And what went through your mind when you heard that World War II had ended?

I guess one of the things that went through my mind was, “Well, what happens now, you got into this because of a burning desire to defend your country.” That was the real reason that I, that and the home situation, those two things together. At that point I started to develop a little bit of maturity. I started to let the brain do the decision making, rather than the emotions. And I thought, “There has got to be something different, there has got to be something better. What are the options?” One of the options was to study for four years and get a mates ticket in the merchant navy,

to become a merchant navy officer. And that had some appeal, because it was furthering on the knowledge that I had acquired, and was going to touch on things that I had more than a passing interest in, which was navigation and ship handling. So that was one option. But I felt that if I did that in the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service, it would be very restrictive. I would be limited to going into the lighthouses in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, that was it. As opposed to getting out of that and getting into the broader stream of the merchant service and that then caused me to resign from the job as. I was an ordinary seaman by this time, promoted. Resigned as an ordinary seaman from the Commonwealth Lighthouse Service and as they said at the time "Go on the coast." Now "on the coast" meant that you joined another merchant ship that travelled elsewhere around Australia. The company that I joined was the New Zealand Steam Navigation Company. The ship was *Kini*, a Maori word and *Kini*'s task was to, she also was a very small ship about 1300 tons, and had to be for a particular reason, which I will tell you about. *Kini*'s responsibility was to go to Strahan on the west coast of Tasmania, pick up copper ore and take it to Port Kembla, unload it at Port Kembla. Pick up beer at Port Kembla and take it back to Strahan, now that was the role. Now the ships at the time Kini, Kowhai, can't think of the name of the other one but all New Zealand boats had to be small in order to get through what they call Hell's Gates, which is the entry to the big harbour on which Strahan is situated. I don't know if you have ever been to Tasmania but you've heard of the Franklin River, Franklin River flows into; what's the name of this harbour? Very big harbour. Doesn't matter it will come to me in a minute. And incidentally Sarah Island is situated in this harbour. You've read a book, or heard of a book called *For the Term of his Natural Life*, based on Sarah Island. So that's the area. In those days Mount Lyle was very viable and very active in terms of mining. And they used to mine the copper at Mount Lyle, put it in these little railway trucks and take it down to Regatta Point at Strahan, where the gantry would lift the truck off the bogeys, take it over to the hold of the ship, tip it upside down and the copper ore would go into the ship. Now

that was my first introduction to trade unionism and I didn't like what I saw. I don't need to go into the details.

Well it might be good to go into a little bit of detail. What was your experience there?

Bribery, corruption, exerting unnecessary, undue influence on the management. And the management in return acting in a confrontational way. Trade unions, management were poles apart and to my innocent but logical mind I thought, "What's the point in this, you're both in this business towards a common end, a common objective. Why not get together, why not understand each other's perspective and point of view. Why not cooperate to the benefit of both parties and the end result?" Time and again I would see this. I remember one occasion in Strahan, the bo'sun came down to the seaman's quarters where I was and he said, "Do you want to earn a few bob [shillings]?", and I said, "Yeah, sure." He said, "We have got to double up the lines." Now doubling up the lines means that if the ship is tied up with two lines forward, two ropes forward and a couple of wires amidships, doubling up the lines means adding two lots of headlines and stern lines and two lots of spring wires as they called themselves, because the weather was turning sour. Now that took the bo'sun and myself about probably 20 minutes to double up the lines. He said, "You can claim three hours overtime for that." I said, "You're joking." He said, "No." He said, "They," meaning the management, "the ships officers want us to do it, but we will do it on our terms." Now to me, that was nice to have the three hours overtime but what a way to go about it. So that was another simple little example of the effect of trade unionism. So after those sorts of experiences I thought, "There's got to be a better way to earn a living." I didn't know what it was. So I quit that job and took a job as a painter's assistant, painting houses while I looked for things to do. Didn't take long. I happened to see a notice in a newspaper, an advertisement in a newspaper one day and coincidentally at much the same time, there were radio announcements that the Royal Australian Navy was looking for recruits to train as radar mechanics and they had to have education in Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics at leaving certificate

level. Now I had that training but I didn't have that level, because I left in February 1945 in the year that I would have qualified. But I thought I'll try. So I applied, I was interviewed and they said, "Well you don't have the educational qualifications, but from the tests we've given you, you appear to have the basic knowledge. We'll take you on." And that was the start of my career in the Royal Australian Navy and the reason it came about.

Thank you. That was a wonderful transition from the lighthouse supply ships to the navy. So you talked a bit about the enlistment that you underwent. Can you go into a bit more detail about when and where you enlisted?

In the navy?

Yes.

Ok, the first introduction was at HMAS Lonsdale, now a multi storey accommodation down in Port Melbourne. That was the naval base for Victoria at the time. We went through all the medical tests, vaccinations, inoculations. That probably took about three days. Each day I would go down there, they would take details, they would give you an inoculation, they would measure blood pressure and then I would go home, and the next day. And eventually they said, "Okay, on the 24th of September you will report here and you will join the rest of the recruits who are coming in on this intake." So on the 24th of September, in the morning, I went down to Port Melbourne. All of us eager recruits got into a bus and we were driven to HMAS *Cerberus* down in Crib Point, used to be referred to in those days as Flinders Naval Depot, although it's miles from Flinders. But that was, and still is, the recruit training school for the Royal Australian Navy. Later on, if it becomes appropriate I will tell you what I think of the training that was given to us at the time. On arrival there the first thing we did was we were lined up and read the riot act.

So, George if we can continue the story on from the bus?

Yes, we had the bus ride down to Flinders Naval Depot, HMAS *Cerberus*.

Don’t remember anything about the ride, but the first thing I do remember about arriving there was coming through what was then the main gate. The main gate there has now been blocked off. At the main gate there was a sentry box with a sentry and two very big old figureheads from sailing ships. Remember in the old days they used to have the women or men or saints carved intricately out of wood and painted garish colours. Two of those; one on either side of the gate. That was my first introduction to HMAS *Cerberus*.

Can you recall what the figureheads were of?

No, I don’t. They are probably still down there in the archive somewhere. So the bus has proceeded down the road, stopped outside J block, the recruit school. Ordered out of the bus, stand to attention. “I said stand to attention!” “Don’t move.” All of a sudden we were in discipline, all in civvies [civilian clothing]. “Right the first thing we are going to do to you is give you a haircut.” So we all lined up at the barber and our heads were completely shorn of hair. Next thing we were taken to slops. Slops is the in word for clothing equipment. “What size shoes do you take?” “8.” “Here’s some 9s.” “What are these things?” “Those, my son, are shirts, you wear a shirt under your uniform. You do not wear a dickie front.” “What’s a dickie front?” Well a dickie front was purported to look like a shirt. It’s a square piece of material with a blue strip across the top and it was tied around the body with string, tape. So that it fitted snugly against the body, as opposed to the shirts which were voluminous, and they looked untidy. So the real sailors wore dickie fronts in their tiddly suits. Tiddly was “in”, you know, swagging bell-bottoms and cap flat aback. Whereas the “pussa”, purser, a corruption of the word purser. The pussa uniform was drab with a shirt instead of a dickie shirt with its hat square on the brow. “You will not wear tiddly gear; you will wear uniform gear, with your hair cut.”

So why weren’t you allowed to wear the dickie top?

Because it was unhygienic. The shirt, of course, covered the armpits and so on. And it was also warmer, and it absorbed the perspiration whereas

the dickie front didn’t. For the next six weeks then we experienced recruit school. We were given our hammocks and we were taught how to lash up and stow the hammock.

How do you lash up?

Imagine a room like this and across the room at a height of about two and a bit metres are big steel bars that are separated physically by about probably three metres. Now between those two iron bars the hammock is slung. At each end of the hammock there is a rope and the rope goes around the iron bar at one end and is fixed to the ring in the hammock at that end and the same the other end. Now around the hammock in which is the mattress, is a rope, and that rope circles and lashes the hammock with seven circles. Not six, not eight, seven, have you got that, seven. So each night we would put our hammocks up and we would unlash them, and at “lights out” which was at 10 o’clock, into those hammocks, not a noise, not a sound, you’ll go to sleep. Six o’clock in the morning the duty recruit instructor would come around with a big stick and he would belt the bottom of the hammocks. Couldn’t hurt you of course because of the padding of the mattress and so on. “Out, out, out, wakey, wakey. Sun will burn your eyes out!” “Up, up, up!” So you’d leap out of bed, put on your shorts and your runners and your shirt, outside. Physical instruction for 20 minutes. Inside, shower, shave, get dressed. Breakfast seven thirty.

What was involved in physical instruction?

Hand presses, running on the spot, jumping up and down and all those traditional things. Breakfast was great. First up was burgoo. Burgoo is a Scottish name and it means porridge. Now you couldn’t have sugar on your porridge, you could have milk if you like but no sugar. Boiled eggs, toast, butter, jam, marmalade, no bacon, no fried eggs, boiled eggs, because they could be thrown into a container, a hundred of them and boiled up and then dished out After breakfast was colours. Now colours was at 8 o’clock. Everyone in the recruit establishment, and there were probably, and this means the ship company and all those undergoing advanced training and officers going under training and recruits, and

there might be five or six hundred. And they would line up around the parade ground in our divisions and the officer in charge of each group would call us to attention. And he would report us to the senior officer with the parade and precisely at 8 o'clock the signalman would announce to the officer on the parade, "8 o'clock sir" and the officer on parade would respond, "Make it so." The signalmen would then raise the flag, the ensign and the band would strike up and play "God Save the Queen", and the signalman had to get that flag to the masthead as the last strains of "God Save the King" were being played. If he got it there before, or he got it there after the end he was in trouble. But I used to like that "8 o'clock sir," "Make it so." So after that we would all then march off to the band to our various training activities, and for us it was the bull ring. Now the bullring was a large area perhaps two acres of fine red dust and we would "square bash" in this until morning teatime. What do they call it, not smoko, stand easy? For ten minutes then we could have a drink of water out of the tap, no cups of tea, no luxuries like that. And then until lunchtime more square bashing. Marching backwards and forwards, learning to form on the left, learning to form on the right, learning to slow march, learning to salute by numbers, learning to salute. All this sort of thing. In reality when I look back at it, it was simply instilling discipline. What we learnt in the way of practical things like how to salute and how to march you could teach in a matter of ten minutes, but the key thing was discipline. When you had an order you obeyed it, implicitly and you did it to the very best of your ability. And that went on for six weeks, and during those six weeks while our hair was still growing again we were restrained from going ashore Even in a naval establishment on shore, if you leave it, you are still going ashore. And the highlight of the week then was Sunday. In the drill hall on Sunday was prayers. So we would go along to the drill hall on Sunday and have prayers and sing hymns. Now the officers were in one section; the menials, like me, at the time, were in the other section, but up top were the WRANS [Women's Royal Australian Naval Service] and this was our first and only sight of females for the whole week, so that was the reason why going to prayers

was so looked forward to. But that drill hall was a remarkable place. It had a smell about it that was wonderful. I'm sure that the amount of polish that was put on that floor would sink a destroyer over the years it was put on. It was used by the gunnery school for practice indoors when it was wet, raining. It was used for physical training, climbing ropes to the ceiling. It was used for the theatre, the movies on Saturday nights. It was used for the Roman Catholics' communion, sorry, holy communion or whatever it was they have in the mornings. Then later the Anglicans for "holy commotion" as we used to call it, and it was used for the general service. On one occasion the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra came down and it was used for a symphony recital. But it was a remarkable building and has since been unfortunately demolished because it was just falling into disrepair. But repeating what I said before, it had this wonderful aroma of tar, of rope, of polish. All the brass work in there was polished daily. Wonderful place.

Now you mentioned to us before when you were talking us through a typical day that you would stop for stand easy then do some more square bashing. What would happen next in your typical day?

The bugle would sound at ten minutes to twelve, midday. Which means that all recruits would re-group, form up on the road. The band would appear again, precisely at 12 o'clock we would march up the road and back to recruit school where we were dismissed and we would line up for lunch. Lunch was a wonderful meal, always hot cooked on cold days. There would be soup. There was always plenty of bread and butter and jam on the tables. It was always a roast of some sort, although very rarely chicken, mainly beef, lamb, pork. Lots of vegetables, lots of gravy. After lunch you could do what you like for at least half an hour. You could write a letter home, you could sit and do nothing. You could wash out some underwear or socks. Then at one o'clock the procedure would be repeated again. You would form up on the road in your divisions. The band would come back again and you would march of to your point and place of training. And this was for the whole of the establishment, whether you were an officer undergoing advanced training, an officer

undergoing preliminary training, petty officers or chief petty officers doing advanced training, right down to the recruits. The whole establishment was geared to discipline and training. Then stand easy in the afternoon, then again at ten minutes to four, the bugle would sound again, 4 o'clock, march back to recruit school and then your time was your own for the rest of the day unless you were in the duty watch. There were three duty watches and duty watch responsibility was to sweep out the quarters, clean out the heads, which are the toilets and the showers and to stand by for rounds. Standing by for rounds means that at 8pm the duty officer would come around to inspect the quarters. If you were on duty you would stand at the door, salute the officer as he came, report, "J Block ready for inspection, sir." "Very well, let us inspect." And the odd thing was that you were allowed to have your hammock up at that stage and if you wanted to you could be in your hammock and as the officer came through you had to pretend to be asleep. If you were out of your hammock you had to stand to attention. And some of the things that the officer would look at would be to make sure that each locker where you had your personal effects, was correctly stowed. He'd open a locker up, the boots, two pairs of boots, had to be there in that position, not there, or there, but there. Your shirts had to be folded there, your underwear had to be folded there, your socks had to be there, your spare suit had to be folded up, seven creases in the bell-bottoms, inside out, folded up in seven creases. The towel had to be on the rack immediately above your locker, folded in three so that your name, stamped on the towel, showed directly at the bottom. Those were the important things he had to look at. And he'd always find something wrong. And again, in retrospect, it was part of the discipline.

This is incredible detail that you are giving us. I'm really enjoying this detail. You are doing such a great job. What did you think about this? What was your opinion about the recruitment training that you were doing?

At the time, bloody stupid. I mean I know how to salute. I know how to march. I know how to swing my arms. Why go on for weeks after weeks?

Then the bullring where you are covered in dust and you take your boots and your socks off at night to have a shower and you are covered in red dust, absolutely stupid. But thinking back, vitally important, you are in an organisation where tomorrow, almost literally, you would be at sea fighting the enemy. You are given an order, you carry out that order, and you might survive. You don't carry out that order, you would be killed. And that's the importance of it, instilling discipline in people.

How did you get on with your fellow recruits.

I was in a very fortunate position because most of them, in fact all of them in my group either came from school or from other jobs. I came from the merchant navy. I knew what a ship was and at recruit school, on those occasions where we were taken into the equipment room, I knew what a sail was, I knew what a cringle was, I knew what a bowline was in terms of rope handling. I knew how to splice; I knew all of those things. So I was a, not a hero, but someone to be respected.

How long did the training last for?

Six weeks.

And what happened after that?

We then were sent off to our various trade schools, because in the recruit school you would be all mashed together. There would be seaman, there would be stokers, there would be telegraphists, there would be cooks, there would be stewards, there would be radio mechanics. Now they all went off to their various schools. All the schools, except our school, were part of HMAS *Cerberus*. Our school was in Adelaide. We were based at HMAS *Torrens*, again no longer there. That's at Port Adelaide. Each day we would get into buses and we would be bussed up to the port road to what is now the University of South Australia. In those days it was called the South Australian School of Mines. And there for the next six months we underwent technical training in basic electrics, how motors and generators work, how alternators work, basic radio. We were introduced to the thermionic valve, which hardly exists any more. We built our own

radio transmitters, we built our own radio receivers so that at the end of six months we were pretty skilled as radio technicians in fundamental radio technology.

How many other men were you training with?

In my class there were nine people. Now that program started in December 1945 and went through to April 1947 and that was the subject of the book that I wrote. In that period something like 15 classes of on average ten people went through. So the School of Mines and HMAS *Torrens* turned out something like 140 radio, radar mechanics. Quite a number of them fell by the wayside. Didn't like it or found the training a bit tough. But most of us survived it.

And what were the instructors like?

They were a mixture. There was one fellow; I'm trying to think of his nickname. Can't think of it. They were all very competent in their respective fields. All except one by the name of Don Crowley was ex civilian. They were all in their 40s, 50s having been in commercial radio and related activities previous to being recruited by the navy to come in. Actually they weren't recruited by the navy to come in; they were recruited by the School of Mines, who had the contract to do the training for us in the navy, all with the exception of this fellow Don Crowley, who was an ex HO radio mechanic. HO meaning Hostilities Only. He had done his time in the navy and was discharged, and then became an instructor. Oh, Practical Jack was the name of the fellow I was trying to think of; Practical Jack. Don was the only ex naval person, and we got along well with him because in terms of age he was sort of like us. We were 17, 18, 19, 20 at the outside and Don was less than 30. So there was a personal relationship there. But the others were like our great uncles, but they were all very competent guys.

Could you define for us what exactly was the role of the, is it radar, or is radio?

Both.

Both.

They were known as radio mechanics but they had the responsibility of the maintenance of all electronics equipment, which included radar. Some were initially trained on radio and then cross-trained later onto radar. And that happened after the time at Adelaide. We were then moved to HMAS Watson in Sydney for four months where we did our specialised training. And as I said, some were trained specifically in the advanced radio communications stuff; the big transmitters. I will tell you about one of them in a minute. And some were trained in the pulse technique of radar. Now we did that training after the radio training, and the radar training was at HMAS Watson. The radio people then went on to Canberra for another six weeks. And there are two establishments at Canberra, HMAS Harman, which was the receiving station for all of the radio transmissions in the Royal Australian Navy into Australia, from anywhere in the world. And Belconnen. Now Belconnen was not an HMAS for some peculiar reason. Harman was a ship, Belconnen wasn't. Belconnen at that time had the biggest radio transmitter in the southern hemisphere. It had a power output of 200 kilowatts. It had a very low frequency. It was 32 kilocycles, kilohertz. Now that's very, very low frequency and the combined power and low frequency, I don't know if you know anything about radio transmission, but let me just digress and explain that for a bit. VHF, Very High Frequency, the communication technique that is used by aircraft for example, very high frequency which is from 100 up to 160 kilohertz. That is what they call "line of sight" transmission. If you transmit a radio signal at that frequency it goes line of sight, in a straight line. Therefore, height above the terrain is important in getting distance because of the curvature of the earth. Now low frequency radio waves are not line of sight. They follow the curvature of the earth, and they can only follow it so far as the power that it emits. Now this transmitter at Belconnen as I said had 200 kilowatts power output which is small now compared with some but because of the combined power output and the low frequency, that transmitter could transmit to any Australian naval ship, anywhere in the world. Direct

transmission without satellite links. Now the aerial for that was huge. If you imagine three 600 feet high radio steel masts with a wire stretched between and the transmitting signal going up a wire as thick as my thumb to the aerial, that was the method of transmission. And in those days in Belconnen you could look 360 degrees around and not see a thing, nowadays there are houses all around the place. So the radio people having done their initial training of six months at Adelaide, having done their detailed technical training on the bigger transmitters and more powerful receivers at Watson went to Canberra, to Harman and Belconnen, for a further six weeks. At the end of that they were considered to be let loose on the naval world.

So I take it you were part of the radio crowd?

Part of the radio crowd, yes.

So what happened when you were released to the world?

Unfortunately for me I was assigned to stay at Watson as a Maintenance Engineer on the equipment there.

Why was that unfortunate?

I wanted to go to sea; some of the others went to sea, why couldn't I go to sea? But that was life.

Why? Were you able to ascertain as to why it was you were left on shore?

No, no correspondence will be entered into; the judge's word is final. It wasn't a question of ability.

So what did your job involve there at Watson?

Being the training establishment for the radio part of the business it had a whole range of transmitters that are used or were used in naval ships and naval shore establishment. Every type of transmitter that was in existence, there was one of those there, and the same for the receivers. It was also, it had the duel role of being a training establishment and the communications point for the Sydney region. So all the transmitted and

received signals would come into Watson and then be relayed up to Garden Island where naval headquarters were. So Watson was the central technical point. So my job was one of the maintenance technicians there.

And what would be a typical day for you as a maintenance technician?

Occasionally there were breakdowns so you had to respond immediately to the breakdown and find out what had gone wrong and fix it. But there is very little in the way of preventative maintenance you can do in a piece of electronics equipment, even in those days. So it was a question of keeping abreast of developments and waiting for something to happen. And of course installing new equipment as it came, and discontinuing obsolete equipment as it became obsolete. It was an easy job; no time demands at all except when something went wrong, then all hell would break loose and you would have to fix it like yesterday.

So what happened after this four months at Watson?

No, the four months at Watson was training followed by six weeks at Canberra training and then back to Watson as part of what they called “the ship’s company”. I was no longer a trainee; I belonged to the ship HMAS Watson.

So how long were you?

I will have to refer to my notes.

That’s okay.

Can I put my glasses on?

Yes.

About a year I was there and then I was had my wish granted and I was drafted to a ship. Drafted means posted. Not the sort of draft I wanted but at least it was a ship. And it was HMAS Gladstone. Now Gladstone was a corvette. Corvettes were very important during the war. About 60 of them were built in Australia and they were very important for

minesweeping and escort duties used all over the Pacific war theatre. At the time I joined Gladstone she was one of the two training ships for HMAS *Cerberus*. So back to *Cerberus* but this time as a member of the crew of HMAS Gladstone. Now Gladstone's job was to take recruits to school, to sea, and give them sea training. Recruits whether they were seaman recruits, whether they were leading mates, petty officers, doing coxswain qualification certificates. Training ships for officers, doing navigation courses, training ships for midshipmen giving them experience in ship handling, navigation. So from the point of view of taking the trainee and giving him live actual real experience at sea was a very important job. And once again I had very little to do because the communications equipment on a little ship like a corvette, is pretty simple. There was a couple of transmitter receivers on the bridge. There was the main transmitter and the main receiver in the wireless office so I had very little to do.

So what would you do?

Difficult to say now. I would help out on occasions with advice and guidance on some of the trainees, particularly when they got seasick. HMAS *Cerberus* is on the shores of Hans Inlet. Hans Inlet is a part of Westernport Bay. Westernport Bay is adjacent to Port Phillip Bay. Hans Inlet is invariably flat calm. Westernport Bay can get a bit choppy. Bass Strait can be like a millpond today and be a raging storm tomorrow. No, to get from Hans Inlet through Westernport Bay to Bass Strait might take that ship three hours. And within three hours, lots of cocky young trainees would go from being smart Alec to heaving over the sides of the ship, and they needed a bit of support.

How would you support them?

Oh, just by comforting them, telling them that "it won't last for ever," and you know, those sort of things. Also ships in those days had a secret machine called the Typex. You've heard of the Enigma machine? Typex was the allied version of their Enigma machine, and I was the only one trained on Typex. That was part of the training at HMAS Harman. So I

used to have a little bit of fun playing with Typex trying to understand it, and more importantly trying to beat it. You could never beat it though.

Can you go into a little bit more detail about your training in Typex involved?

Yes. Typex was an electro mechanical device, and before I forget it I think that my experience with that is a thing that has led me to be a fanatic about doing cryptic crossword puzzles. I love the *Sydney Morning Herald* cryptic crossword puzzles. About once every three months I can get one out. Typex was an electro mechanical device that had a series of little direct current motors in it; 24 volt motors in it and a series of wheels. Each wheel had on either side a series of brass contacts which were connected internally one to another by wires. Each wheel was different. Each wheel could be put in one of two ways. So you would put an electrical impulse in one end of the Typex, it would go through all these combinations of electrical connections and come out the other end. Now unless those electrical combinations were the same setting in the transmitting device as in the receiving device, nothing would come out of the receiver. So you could get a radio signal coming in, connect it to the Typex and providing that signal had been composed by the Typex at the sending end in the same precise manner as the Typex was composed in the receiving end, something would come out. So each wheel had to be the same, and the direction of each wheel had to be the same. And it wasn't as though there were just 12 wheels, there were about 30 wheels.

How new a technology was Typex?

In those days it was state of the art, it was something fantastic. But when you think about it conceptually it's a very simple system, like connecting a wire from here to there via a switch. That's very basically what it is. If the switch is on the electrical current will come through. If you've got two switches, both have to be on. If you have 50 switches, 50 have to be on.

Now you mentioned when you were on the corvette that you would try and beat the Typex. Can you explain that?

Yes, I would simulate a signal coming in and I would position the wheels in a certain format and then I would say to my self, “Okay, now what are the permutations and combinations of those wheel locations that are possible to get the signal through?” And what are the permutations and combinations where it is impossible. Now if you imagine that you have two wheels with 24 connections on it, 24 by 24 is a large number. If you have ten wheels, 24 by 24 by 24, that number is astronomical, but as with the Enigma machine the code was broken. I haven’t got the faintest idea of how that code was broken. Now my concept was that if the code of Enigma could be broken then the code for Typex could be broken. I had an impossible task but I had fun trying.

You were trying to break the code.

Yeah, yeah.

George, whose was the prerogative to actually operate the Typex machine?

Exclusively the skipper because it was a device that was designed to encrypt messages, information such as the enemy or other persons couldn’t have access to it. It was therefore a secret device and a very limited number of people had access to the use of it and who knew the coding for the particular day, and the time of the day the coding was changed. It wasn’t always changed at midnight. That was another factor in obfuscating the whole issue from others who might otherwise want access to it. As well as the number of wheels, the position of the wheels, the time of the day of the change was also important.

So it was always changed, so it was regularly changed in much in the same way that say a cipher code would be?

Exactly. So the skipper was the only person who really had access to that information.

What was you own responsibility with regard to the Typex?

In the event that it broke down. For example, one of the driving motors might burn out, a fuse might blow. Things like that. There had to be

someone who had sufficient technology knowledge to fix the thing. Mechanically, electrically it was a fairly simple device.

How did you learn the maintenance of the machine?

When I was doing my training in HMAS Harman on the receiving equipment there. They devoted two days to a Typex. Here is the Typex, this is what it does, here's how you pull it apart, here are the things that are likely to go wrong with it, here are the spare parts that you will probably need, or the components, there it is. Fairly straightforward.

Good, thanks for that. Could you give us a description of the Gladstone as a corvette?

Gladstone was a corvette, a small warship. Incidentally all the war vessels are correctly termed warship, and then within that broad category you have battleships, heavy cruisers, light cruisers, destroyers, sloops, frigates, corvettes. So a corvette was one of them of a stable of warships. Small ships specifically designed for mine clearance, not necessarily mine laying, could be adapted for depth charging, but more generally used as escort for larger vessels and escort for convoys.

Now, can you tell us a bit about the skipper?

The skipper at the time was Lieutenant Commander Henry Cooper. Henry was one of the old school; very prim and proper and his word was law. I can remember one day we were in Hans Inlet. We had been charged with the responsibility of doing some chart updating as far as depths are concerned, and the method of doing it was by echo sounder plus by hand line for comparison and one of the officers; one of the junior officers had the name of Bennett. And Bennett was on the starboard wing of the bridge this particular day peering over the side and he kept saying, "Sir, I can see the bottom." "Bennett, everything is under control." "But sir, I can see the bottom." "Bennett, I am in command." The next thing "crunch," we went aground. Fortunately the tide was on the ebb and probably about five hours later as the tide came in, we floated and went off. But Henry got into all sorts of strife with CSTFND, Commander

Superintendent Training Flinders Naval Depot. He was the big boss of Flinders and of course the training ships came under his command. And poor old Henry was on the mat over that.

I bet he was. Now once your time had come to an end on the Gladstone, what happened next?

Well, at that time the fleet air arm had been announced as forming in Australia, and I'm talking about 1947, '48 now. They called for volunteers. Now its time honoured practice in the armed service that you never volunteer for anything. But I did, I volunteered, along with quite a lot of others and I was accepted as a successful entrant into the fleet air arm. A couple of months later in company with about 12 other radio mechanics we were aboard the P & O [Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company] liner, Maloja, heading for the United Kingdom as passengers, paid passengers. Fremantle, Colombo, Bombay, Aden, Suez, through the canal, Port Said, Marseille, in the south of France, Tilbury. From Tilbury then by train to Lancashire where we spent the next 13 months at HMS *Ariel* which was the Royal Navy's establishment for training electrical and radar technicians in airborne and air supported communications and radar equipment.

Just before we move onto this period of training, could you define for us what the fleet air arm was?

Fleet air arm, as it was proposed by the government, was initially to have the loan of a fleet aircraft carrier. Light fleet aircraft carriers were small carriers by comparison with some of the things that you see today. Anything up to about 20,000 tons. Subsequently, and while that was in process, HMAS *Sydney* as she was to become, was refitted in England and sailed to Australia to become the first aircraft carrier we had. In fact as we on the P&O liner were heading for England, at Port Said we passed *Sydney* heading south to Australia.

Did you realise what the ship was at that point?

Oh, yes, yes. And of course we shouted and cheered at our fellow sailors

on the *Sydney*.

What was the purpose of you being sent to England for training? What sort of training were you being sent to England to do?

Training on aircraft, airborne radar and radio equipment and the special equipment that is shore based and ship based for supporting that. I will give you a couple of examples of the specialised equipment. One was known as the YE beacon. Now a YE beacon is ship-borne, a YG beacon is ashore, doesn't matter, it is the same sort of thing. And you have a directional aerial, like this screen behind us, flat, square and it rotates slowly through 360 degrees and in any one of about 12 sectors on the way it transmits a Morse code letter. In the first sector it might be "A". In the next sector it might be "S," and so on. So that an aircraft that is flying and is unsure where he is and switches on his ZBX receiver which is associated with the beacon and as the directional aerial faces him, he hears this code. He knows therefore which direction he needs to fly to get back to the aircraft; that's one device. Another device was known as the FV5. As I mentioned previously the frequency of operation of the communications VHF equipment was 100 to 160 megahertz. The FV5 was a much more sophisticated device. It had a circular radar screen and as the pilot spoke on his communications thing, maybe it was up to say 138.8 megacycles. The FV5 would be tuned into that same frequency and on the circular screen from the centre a line would come out. That line would indicate the direction that the aircraft was, relative to where the FV5 was. So there are two different types of devices specifically for aircraft use that we were trained on. Then there were the normal things like HF and VHF communication. There was another special device called the AYF. Now the AYF had two di-pole aerials underneath the tail plate. An aeroplane has main plane and tail plane; tail plane is the little one. The AYF would send a signal to the ground by a transmitter. It would be reflected back to the other aerial and because of the time difference between transmission and reception, there would be a frequency difference because it was a frequency modulated signal. That frequency difference was then translated within the machine to indicate the height.

And it was a very accurate thing because there were two ranges. Range one was zero to four hundred feet. The other was zero to four thousand feet. There was another one called an APX. This was part of a system known as IFF, Identification Friend or Foe. That would operate quite automatically unbeknown to the aircrew, and if you had in your aircraft or in your ship an APX transmitter it would send out a signal, it would be received by the aircraft and if it was a friendly aircraft the coding and the frequency would cause the transponder in the aircraft to reply automatically back to the originating signal. If they got no reply, this is an enemy, “Bang!” So those are the sorts of, sonar buoys too, we were trained on sonar buoys.

What were the sonar buoys?

Sonar buoys. They came in different versions as they were developed, but if you can imagine a cylinder, it’s about this big, say about 9 inches in diameter. It’s about less than a metre, 80 centimetres high. In the bottom of it, it has a microphone, more correctly known as a hydrophone, on the end of a long coil of wire. On the top it has an aerial. Six of them were fitted under the wings of the aircraft. The aircraft would go out and they would suspect that a submarine might be there somewhere so they would fly around in a big circle dropping a sonar buoy in a pattern. As the sonar buoy which was controlled by a parachute hit the water, the impact would open a switch, which would do three things. One, it would disconnect the aerial, two it would drop the microphone in the water to a depth of about 40 feet and three it would switch on the transmitter, so that if there was a submarine making submarine noises within the vicinity, like within say a kilometre or so, those noises would be picked up by the hydrophone, amplified, transmitted, sent back to the aircraft and the observer by understanding what the pattern was, what the frequencies were and so on, he could pin point where that initial noise came from. That’s another example of airborne equipment.

Now I understand the IFF [Identification Friend or Foe] was operating during World War II but how many of these other

technologies were post war developments?

Sonar buoy, I think, was a post war development or a latter post war development. The AYF was a war development. The radar, there were different types of radar. There was search radar; there was intercept radar. The sea venom had a crew of two sitting side by side, the pilot and the observer and the observer operated the radar, the search and intercept radar, and he could direct the pilot on to the target giving him range, bearing, azimuth.

What was the Sea Venom again?

Sea Venom was the first jet borne carrier aircraft.

The training you had been sent across to England for was part of your activities, or your intended activities as part of fleet air arm, I presume?

Yep.

Now you were training at HMS *Ariel*. What did that place consist of?

Interesting. Before the war it was one of Butlin's holiday camps, or a similar sort of thing. It was simply a collection of huts with a central cafeteria and galley and eating facility. It had a sport centre where we used to play badminton and basketball. In the middle of Lancashire. They were fascinating days.

What made them particularly fascinating?

It was at the time, this was back in 1948, '49, when England was still suffering extreme food shortages and we used to get food parcels sent over to us from home, and that made us very popular. I mean a small tin of ham like that, I mean you could take a girl out for whole week on that.

Do you mean you would give the ham to the girl or you would feed her during the expedition?

Another thing that made it fascinating was our first introduction to rum. Rum had been part of the British Navy for hundreds of years, but not the

Australian Navy. Now this rum is something that since I have never tasted anything like. It was ambrosia, it was liquid gold, it was all sorts of things, quite fascinating.

Are these your subjective judgements or are these the categories of rum?

No, my subjective judgements.

I take it from that you actually enjoyed it?

Oh yes, absolutely. Now if you were of the rank of ordinary seaman, able seaman or leading seaman you had to take your rum diluted with water, one part of rum two parts of water. Which was still tasty but it wasn't rum. Once you got to the exultant elevated post of petty officer, which we were at that stage, you could have your rum neat. Another thing, when they dished out the rum to the sailors, the master at arms, which is the chief naval policeman, would stand there and make sure that they drank it. One seaman come forward and hold out his mug or cup or glass and it would be dished out and he had to drink it, straight down like that, couldn't take it away, had to drink it straight down.

Why weren't they allowed to take it away?

Because they might store it then drink it and get drunk you see. Petty officers and chief petty officers were trustworthy persons. Nevertheless we used to store ours and you could take three or four days rum in a little bottle and go ashore to the local pub, which was probably at least 250 yards down the road. For a shilling, mind you, you could buy a pint of beer and you could sit there all night, and for three or four shillings have three pints of beer and your rum and it was a marvellous, very cheap, very wonderful way to get drunk.

How was it you were able to store yours up?

Because we were trusted as petty officers. The ordinary sailor couldn't be trusted but the non commissioned officer—petty officer and chief petty officer—could be trusted in theory, but he wasn't of course.

Now, what was your own response to the training? Was it arduous,

was it enjoyable, how did you feel about it?

I thought it was protracted. We were there for 13 months and I really thought that if they'd put a little bit of pressure on we could have done it in six or eight months. Yes there was a lot to learn but even so. But the good part about that was that we had lots of opportunity to do sightseeing. I had a couple of leaves in London. I palled up with; well two of us palled up with a Scots fellow who was also on the course with us; Andrew McKay. He came from Glasgow, he took us home. Then the three of us toured all around Scotland visiting his sister in the far north, and that was another interesting little experience of Scots hospitality. We went to a ceilidh [pronounced kaylee] on this particular night, and it was absolutely marvellous, shouting and dancing and drinking scotch whisky, a wonderful time.

I'm not familiar with that term ceilidh. What actually is, or was, a ceilidh?

It's an indigenous word for a wonderful party, with dancing. All very innocent, not like you might find these days.

But with an emphasis on traditional Scottish dancing?

Exactly yes, there were pipers, there were the girls doing all this sort of business and there was the Scottish country dancing, which I find, is absolutely wonderful to watch.

There are still people who are totally into that?

Oh yes, so I believe.

So its not that far removed from present day experiences?

No, and it will probably be like that in another hundred years. It's traditional. Anyway on this particular night, it was a cold night, it was in the middle of winter and they said when I went to bed, "We'll keep you warm, we'll give you a hot water bag." So they gave me a hot water bag, the traditional rubber thing with the steel thing. In the morning I woke up and I thought, "There's something wrong here, I don't know what it is." And I got up and went to get dressed and on the instep of my left leg was

a blister and it was the size of a big pigeon's egg. Now that had come from being burnt by the steel top on the rubber hot water bag. That shows you the power of Scotch whisky. I didn't feel a thing.

Must have hurt.

But they were marvellous people, real hospitality, friendly, couldn't do enough for you.

You made a brief reference a few moments ago to the shortages in post war Britain. What other signs were there of a Britain that was clearly suffering a bit in the late 1940s, in terms of shortages, in terms of maybe cleaning up the rubble and whatever else was happening at that time?

Most of the rubble itself had been cleaned up by that time but there was still vast treks of land where a building had once stood and had all been cleared away. Transport around the country was by train, which was an excellent service; trains were always packed. Or local service around the city and into cities was by bus, also very strongly patronised and used. Motor vehicles, very few. I hitchhiked once from Warrington where I was, to Liverpool, and I had three hitchers on the way, no trouble getting those. Anyone in uniform they'd stop for. But there were very few private motor vehicles on the road. Not like nowadays. So shortage of private motor vehicle, cost of food. I was horrified the first time I went to London to see fruit that had come from Spain. Pineapples and grapes. And the price they were asking for those was probably about three or four day's wages for the average Englishman.

Sounds like they were really up against it at that time?

Oh they were, yes. Yes and you would be lucky enough to be invited to someone's place for tea and as a special treat, because you were a visitor, they would put on something like spam and three vegetables. Mashed potato, baked potato, boiled potato.

I would imagine this was quite a contrast to post war Australia at that time?

Oh yes, by comparison, although we did have food rationing here during the war, it was nothing. I mean we had butter, “Butter, what’s butter?” in England. Things have changed dramatically since but in those days it was tough for them.

Now I think you said that you went over there with several people from the RAN [Royal Australian Navy]. How many people did you travel over there with, who also did the courses with you?

There were three courses. I was in the first course, probably no more than ten. I’ve got records of it somewhere. The second course, there were fewer. There were probably about six. In the third course there were a few more. In all, less than 30 of us went to England for those 13 months training.

Were there any Australians among this group whom you became quite friendly with.

Oh yes, quite a number of them. In fact they are part, those who are still alive, are part of this naval association which I started 12 years ago. Interestingly one of them ended up a commodore. Two of them ended up as captains, a couple of commanders, lieutenant commanders. Some stayed as petty officers and chief petty officers.

Which among these people were you best mates would you say?

Probably sounds factualist to say it, but probably all of them. We got along exceedingly well, possibly because we travelled in the ship together as passengers, and that was fun. Because we were a group of Australians, a small group of Australians in the midst of thousands of English people. Again it’s interesting how attitudes change. We wanted to be different. We wanted to show that we were Australians. So we commissioned a local fellow to make up shoulder patches with “Australia” on. And we sewed these on our uniform. We were told to take them off and we said, “No, we’re Australians.” The next thing we had a visit from the naval attaché at Australia House in London. “I’m ordering you to take those off.” “But we’re Australians.” “Take them off, you are navy.” We took

them off. Nowadays Australia.

I wanted to explore a little more while we were on the subject your notion and obviously your mate's notion of pride in Australia. Could you explain to me what Australia at that time meant for you?

What it meant for me. Being self critical it could easily have been said of us, at the time, that we were loud-mouthed braggarts. "You English are funny doing that; we don't do that in Australia." "We have that in Australia but it's better that yours." That's a bit of an exaggeration but that was the attitude. Again using the word I used before, chauvinistic. Fiercely loyal to Australia.

Where did that come from do you think? What gave rise to that in the first place?

I think the reaction against the well-known English upper class, which still exists today, attitude to inferior beings.

We've heard other servicemen talk about being absolutely infuriated by the English referring to them as "colonials". Did you ever strike that?

Yes, yes. The word colonial didn't in itself, didn't adversely affect me, but the implications behind it. "You are second class citizens." We can call you a colonial or we can call you a "ticket of leave man", or whatever else. Whatever we call you doesn't matter, it's what is behind the meaning, behind what we are calling you. You are not up to our standard and I think it was that that caused this reaction. It was there right from the very start.

Was there a notion, at that time, of the Australian cultural cringe?

I hadn't heard that expression at that time. It was some years later that I heard it.

It was very interesting I mean there was an Australian film made in the late '30s called *It Isn't Done* where an Australian sheep farmer wins a baronial title and then has to go and prove himself. I just wondered to what extent, whether your attitude in England

was one of wanting to prove yourself and also to represent Australia?

I don't know that we wanted to prove ourselves. I think we wanted to hit back. We saw the attitude as offensive. And how do you hit back in those circumstances? Use your tongue.

And did you genuinely believe that the Australian virtues and values and skills that you were championing were better than those of the English?

Oh yes, yes.

It was an innate belief?

Whether they were in fact or not I don't know, but we certainly believed that.

Was there a particular instance of being snubbed or being the victim of snobbery among the British that you can call to mind. Was there anything that symbolised or crystallised what you are talking about?

I can't think of any specific incident. But going back to this fellow who came from Australia House to tell us to take the shoulder patches off. I think he desperately wanted to be British. He was acting like an English naval officer. To an extent, arrogant, to an extent dismissive, to an extent overbearing. That would have been one instance I think.

I think that there is that expression "More English than the English". Which still applies to a few people. Now I gather a few of your mates got married around this time?

Yes, at that stage, immediate post war there was still a lot of women in the British armed services and the WRENS, Women's Royal Naval Service. There was as many of them in our camps as there were men. In fact quite a number of them trained as radio and radar mechanics. And to many of our fellows they were nothing short of beautiful. They were the pale English complexion and the cultured voice. And they succumbed to the feminine charms and married.

Was this a prospect for you at this time, in England?

Like most young men I fell in and out of love like every six weeks, but no, I wasn't serious. I was too young. I was only 21 at the time.

I imagine that you would have gone out with one or two of these WRENS.

Yes. And a good night out was to get a party of three or four girls and three or four fellows together. Go to the local pub. Singing at the pub was very popular, darts competitions was very popular. So you could have a really good evening at the pub drinking the cheap beer, having your tot of rum, playing darts, singing songs, it was good.

Was there anyone among these girls that you came close to wanting to propose to?

No.

Had you met Shirley back in Australia at this time?

No.

That was later on. At the end of this training what happened to you?

We all then returned to Australia, once again as passengers on another P & O liner called Ranchi. From there, some home leave then drafted to HMAS *Albatross* at Nowra, then stationed there. Some of us went into squadrons immediately. Some, like myself, were appointed to positions of maintenance at the air station itself. Once again I was disappointed. I got an air station job along with some of the others, but some of them of course went to the squadrons and became associated directly with the aircraft.

What were your duties in this case?

There were two workshops in particular. The air wireless workshop and the air radar workshop where equipment that was carried in aircraft was maintained and repaired. I was one of the three appointed to the air radar workshop.

And this is at *Albatross*?

This is at *Albatross*.

Which I believe was near Nowra?

Yes, it's near Nowra.

What did *Albatross* consist of at that time?

Well *Albatross* had been not known as *Albatross* but it had been there since during the war. It had two airstrips. It had a control tower and a motley collection of wooden huts. Nowadays it's a highly sophisticated technical place. It still has the two airstrips but it has substantial concrete and steel hangars. Substantial buildings, all sorts of technical aids and assistance, but back in those days when it rained you ploughed through the mud to get from one building to another. There were, I think, three squadrons of aircraft there at that time, and not much else.

Doesn't sound like a wildly exciting place at the time?

It wasn't. About 12 kilometres from the village, at the time, of Nowra. Very little in the way of infrastructure to support the married personnel. One of my mates who subsequently became a lieutenant commander lived with his new bride in a garage that had been fitted out with a bed and a wash basin. Three others lived with their respective wives in a place that was named St Eneda, which was a Cornish name. It was a boarding house and they had the luxury of a bedroom each with shared bathroom and shared eating facilities. Another couple lived in a fisherman's hut out at Greenwell Point. Shirley and I, when we eventually married, and this was a couple of years later, lived in a variety of crummy little dumps in Huskisson. You see in those days there was nothing else. Immediately post war, nothing had happened during the war in the way of facilities for families or married people, so you just had to do the best with what you could find.

I got the impression that after World War II there were changes to the RAN, but it doesn't sound like it, at least when it came to providing essential housing facilities there weren't.

Eventually it came, by 1955, about then *Albatross* had an associated village next door, called married quarters. And you know what a Nissen hut is? The navy bought perhaps 40 or 50 of these Nissen huts. Installed them. They had the luxury of a sewerage system. They had the luxury of electricity and they had the luxury of running water. And these were made of available to anyone and everyone regardless of rank. Except the Captain. The captain had his own residence, which was a substantial residence. But everyone else who lived in married quarters lived in a Nissen hut.

What were some of the other main changes to the RAN in the post war decade?

For me personally, and this gets to the reason why I quit the service, one was promotion on the basis of merit. The other one was discontinuance of allowing alcohol on ships at sea. Those were the two main things.

And I gather these things figure later in your story?

Yes.

We'll come to those a little later then. Now at what point did you meet Shirley?

Just prior to, and I'm jumping ahead now. I was on the coronation contingent and just prior to that …

How did you come to meet Shirley?

Well my father, who I mentioned previously I think, had married again and they had a small boy and they were living in Guildford, a suburb of Sydney. I would visit them occasionally from *Albatross*. And on one particular occasion they told me about a terrible thing that had happened to a neighbour who lived in the street behind. He was driving home in his car to do a right hand turn into his street facing directly into the sunlight in the west. As he turned a young fellow came hooting down the road on the correct side, but straight into the car, which was a big old Chrysler weighing about 1300 weight, flew over the top and was killed.

Sorry, who flew over the top?

The young motorbike driver. As a consequence, the fellow driving the car had suffered a traumatic experience and they knew who this fellow was, and he was a neighbour. So I went around there one day when I heard this, to offer my sympathies and he happened to be Shirley's father, and that's how it happened. The girl next door almost.

When was that? How long after you came back to Australia?

Oh, that was a couple of years after, it was about 1952.

And how long after that were you married?

We were married on, well it was two marriages. We had a registry office marriage on the 16th of October 1953, almost 50 years to the day. And we decided that we would do that because being married, the navy provides marriage allowance, money. And as I was about to go to Korea and I would be away for about six months, then six months of marriage allowance would be a nice little nest egg to have. So straight into the registry office, married, off to Korea, but the marriage allowance was paid. And then when we came back from Korea in 1954, we had a proper wedding.

It sounds like you were planning the proper wedding?

Oh, absolutely, yes. No question, we had made up our mind.

Now, for how long did you actually remain based at *Albatross*?

I had a couple of sessions there. I went, after I had been at *Albatross* a while, I'm not sure if I've got this sequence correct. I think I have. I was sent to Flinders again, this time as an instructor teaching basic and advanced radio and radar technology. Became the responsibility of Flinders Naval Depot, taken away from *Torrens* which was disbanded and they needed instructors, so I was one of those, so I had about 12 months in Melbourne as an instructor in the equipment. And it was about that time that they called for volunteers again, for the coronation contingent. I think the whole navy applied and something like 30 naval people was accepted and I was one of the lucky ones.

Could you define for me what the coronation contingent was?

Yes, the coronation contingents, plural, were representatives of all of the British Commonwealth, of nations who supported Britain during World War II. It was to coincide with Queen Elizabeth's coronation on the 2nd of June 1953, and each contingent was made up of components of the armed forces. Papua New Guinea had a component of the special constabulary. Australia had a component of the Royal Australian Navy, Royal Australian Airforce, AIF [Australian Imperial Force], for example. South Africa a similar sort of thing, Canada that sort of thing. And these were the people who did the march through London on coronation day.

And I believe you had quite a memorable trip over there?

I have never experienced anything so amazing. Paid to travel around the world. We left Sydney, our first port of call was Aden. We skipped Colombo and Bombay, the traditional ports of P&O. From Aden up the Red Sea to Suez, through the Suez Canal, Port Said and then to Tobruk and we had a very moving ceremony, Last Post and all that sort of thing at the Tobruk war memorial. From there to Malta and had a few days in the grand harbour in Malta, and that was my first experience of red wine; Chianti. I had never tasted wine before and I've never tasted beer since, I don't think. Love it. From Malta to Gibraltar, and from Gibraltar to Portsmouth and then we went through all the coronation type activities.

Well just before we get to the coronation

activities I believe that the dropping in at Tobruk involved a trip to a war cemetery.

Yes.

Can you talk more about that?

Yes, the war memorial at Tobruk.

That was the Australian War Memorial?

Australian War Memorial at Tobruk. I've visited quite a number of war memorials around the world and I am continually gratified by the condition in which they are kept. The Australian War Graves Commission which is part of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission does an

absolutely outstanding job. All the tombstones are neat. The gardens that surround are neat. Everything is clean. Not a scrap of graffiti anywhere. I don't know what it costs, but whatever it costs its wonderful. That trip we did recently into the Somme Valley. That was a real eye opener. Michelin maps have produced a map which has been overprinted by the Australian War Graves Commission, and you look at this map and there are quite literally hundreds of red spots which you think are graves, they're not, they are cemeteries. And some of those cemeteries are small, three or four hundred graves, some are huge, thousands of graves. I know I'm digressing but I find this fascinating. One of the astonishing ones is in a place called Tincourt, which is in the Somme Valley. And Tincourt has something like 120,000 names of soldiers who were killed in World War I and get this, whose bodies have never been found, 120,000. Tincourt.

It's quite a sobering number actually. It's a very sobering number of undiscovered bodies.

Absolutely yes.

Now was there a special ceremony there, at Tobruk.

Yes, yes. We took a bugler with us and we had a Roman Catholic and an Anglican chaplain aboard with us and they came and they spoke. There was a guard of honour and being the RAF, of course, they provided the rifles. And yes, it was a very moving ceremony. But the war grave itself is stark compared with some of them. The one at Port Moresby for example and the one at Broome are lush trees, green grass, flowers. Tobruk, not a blade of grass anywhere. Stark, very moving.

So it is moving and effective due to its starkness?

Yes

Tell us about the coronation activities themselves as far as you were concerned?

Yes, well we stayed aboard *Sydney* for a few days. We arrived in Portsmouth probably about 10 days prior to the coronation, stayed aboard *Sydney*, and each day we would march up and down the flight

deck and on the wharf because the march through London was going to be about seven or eight miles, and you are carrying a rifle on your shoulder and you can't take it off for that whole distance, so we were pretty fit by the time we moved to England, to London, and we were billeted in Earl's Court. I'm sure you've heard of Earl's Court. On the day of the coronation along with everyone else, we were moved into our assigned position and at the appropriate time we marched off. Now it was an unfortunate situation for two reasons. One, there was drizzling rain, so we were soaked to the skin by the time we finished. That wasn't so bad. But the unfortunate thing from our perspective was we were midway between two bands and at no stage was the whole Australian contingent in step. And that must have looked awful.

So half of you were marching to one beat and the other half were marching to the other.

That's right yeah. So we marched through London and then at the end disbanded and went back to Earls Court and went out that night with about 17,000 million other people and celebrated.

Seems to have been quite a year and time actually?

Oh, absolutely yes. I don't think I've ever seen so many people concentrated in one place in my whole life. But the next day was good, that was June the 3rd. We were assigned a Ghurkha [Nepalese troops in British service] pipe band specifically for us and we marched from Earl's Court to the palace grounds where we assembled with all the contingents from all the other countries. The Queen came out and made a speech and then she commissioned a number of ushers who were army officers, to walk around and present each one of us with the coronation medal. And from there with the Ghurkha band we marched back through the streets of London, people cheering, to Earl's Court. We stayed at Earl's Court then for about three days I suppose, and that was an opportunity to do a bit more sightseeing. And from there we moved to a guard's camp in Surrey, place called Pirbright. And this was another interesting experience. We got there in the afternoon, hot and bothered. "Let's have

a shower, fellas." No hot water. All cold water, so we complained. "What's wrong with you sissies?" "British Army. Cold showers." "All right," so the next morning cold shower, it was awful. And then a couple of us then went up to the galley and said, "Can we have some hot water for a shave, in the mugs?" "Shave in cold water. The British army shaves in cold water." "Can we have a cup of tea?" "Yeah, mate plenty of tea over there, help yourself." Poured a cup of tea, went back to the bathrooms and shaved in the cup of tea. Beat them.

You had to get them somehow? Sounds like you did.

So from there, fortunately, we were only there one night then back to the ship in Portsmouth and the next day after that was Spithead Review. Spithead Review has been held twice, three times in the 20th century. Elizabeth, George before her, George the fifth, not George the sixth and Edward the seventh. And Spithead Review is held in the Solent, the sea between the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth and all the ships of the British Navy and the visiting navy's all line up in anchor and then the Queen or the King in the royal yacht moves up and down in between the rows of ships and everyone salutes and throws their caps in the air. And as far as the eye could see except for land, Isle of Wight, and the mainland of England, as far as you could see, ships, warships. Quite astonishing. The next day we left England and sailed west.

That sounds quite a highlight?

Oh, absolutely.

I expect that you still look back upon that with the visions and the memories of what you saw quite strongly.

Yes, an astonishing thing. Happens to so few people in a lifetime.

When you sailed west what happened then?

We headed for Halifax, Nova Scotia. A good will visit to Canada. My lasting memory of Halifax is housewives. All the houses in the inner city area are built right on the street and you walk right out the front door, down a couple of stone steps and you are on the footpath. And my lasting

memory, quite literally, dozens and dozens of Canadian housewives out on their hands and knees scrubbing the stone steps. Amazing.

Sounds like something of a movie?

Yes, and we were entertained there by the Canadian Navy. Taken out to a Canadian transmitting station. We spent five minutes inspecting the equipment and the next five hours drinking beer. From there we sailed south to Baltimore, which is the port for Washington and New York. We were given a guided tour of the Washington environs, the Arlington Cemetery, the Washington Memorial , the Lincoln Memorial, we were entertained at the Australian Embassy in Washington by the Ambassador who at that time was Sir Percy Spender. And he had thoughtfully recruited two lots of people. One, all the good-looking young secretaries he could find and the good services of the local beer suppliers. And that was wonderful. They thought we looked marvellous because we were all dressed in our white uniforms. It was summertime of course, June.

I understand that at a certain point of the trip and it may well have been in London you appeared in a newsreel?

Oh, no, no. That was later on when I was in Korea. Shirley was at the movies with some friends and as one of the preludes, the main feature they'd put on some newsreel items and one of them was a retrospect thing, looking back on the past. And this feature was on the coronation and apparently the camera had focused on the naval component of the Australian contingent and I marched, apparently, right across the screen and the whole theatre knew. "It's George, it's George!"

That's fantastic. I mean what are the odds against something like that.

So from Halifax to Baltimore. From Baltimore then south again to Kingston, Jamaica. The Jamaican people welcomed us with opened arms. I understand that today Jamaica is in a state of political turmoil and that there are street gangs and there are murders. In those days it was almost utopia. Very friendly, big beaming smiles, poor as church mice, but lovely

people. From there across the Caribbean to the Panama canal. There was a US naval depot called Pensacola, and once again we were entertained, this time by the United States Navy and then we went through the Panama Canal. Now that experience was quite different from the Suez. I don't know if you've been through either canal but the Suez canal, the land either side is to all intents and purposes flat. Sand, occasional small villages and in the centre around a town called Al-Ismailiyah there are some salt water lakes, but very uninspiring un-touristy looking place. The Panama Canal, vastly different. Mountains either side. You go up over the mountain and then down again through a series of water locks. Prior to the trip away if you can imagine an aircraft carrier with gun sponsons on either side they cut off about almost a metre of gun sponsons, on both sides of the ship and then bolted them back on again. When we got to Panama, to Pensacola rather, on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal, they unbolted these pieces, put them inboard so that we could fit into the canal locks. And I'm not exaggerating when I say the space between the cut edge of the sponsons on both sides and the stone walls of the locks was no more than about a foot.

What was the vessel you were aboard at this time?

Sydney.

It was the HMAS *Sydney*, the aircraft carrier, which obviously didn't leave much room in those locks?

No. So all these aircraft carriers the yanks have, none of them would go anywhere near fitting through the Panama Canal. So they've got to have literally two navies; one on the east coast and one on the west because the only other way is around Cape Horn.

Cape Horn, which of course is pretty storm ridden. So you got through the Panama Canal and then obviously headed across the Pacific?

Yes, to a little place called Hawaii. And that also was interesting. We were given entrée to what the American's call their PX stores. I'm not

quite sure was PX means but it's the store where American armed personnel and their families can go and buy things. Food, clothes. The Australian dollar at that stage was worth more than the American dollar. Something like a dollar 20, although we didn't have Australian dollars in that time. You understand what I mean?

Yes, you are talking about pounds at that time?

Yes, ten shillings Australian. The equivalent of a dollar today was worth more than the American dollar. Now, for one American dollar we could buy three cans of cold beer and a hamburger and have ten cents change. Do you like that?

That's pretty good.

So, we saw a little bit of Hawaii, swam at Waikiki beach which was a disappointment. Gaped and gawked at Diamond head, but it was pleasant. Saw the aftermath of the Pearl Harbour bombing. At that stage I don't think they had built a museum over the ship that was sunk. The museum that exists there today. It's an interesting place the island of Oahu. There is another island called Hawaii, the big island, and that again is quite different. But Oahu today, in my opinion having been there fairly recently, is economically depressed and if it wasn't for the United States Navy I think they would be in dire straits.

Now as you travelled back from England were there any other ceremonies or commemorative things that you were taking part in?

Yes, after Hawaii, we went to Auckland, to, you see we had the New Zealand contingent aboard with us too. At Auckland there was a civic reception. The main street of Auckland leads up the hill to the town hall from the wharf. So we assembled at the wharf and then with the band playing, marched up the hill to the town hall where there was a civic reception. And that was good fun too. Dancing and singing and eating. But that was the last official function. When we got back to Sydney there was no function at all. Everyone was glad to get home. But one of the

interesting things for me, and there were many interesting things. But one was that on board with us there was something like six VC [Victoria Cross] winners and three George Cross winners. Four George Cross winners. The four George Cross winners were Australians and five of the six VC winners were Australian. The other one was Jack Hinton from New Zealand.

Which of those award winners stands out in your memory?

I guess Frank Partridge for a number of reasons. He was a quiet unassuming sort of a fellow. I don't know how they could have done it, when I say they, I mean the officers aboard. In order to keep the army and the air force occupied while we were at sea, they gave them tasks to do like sweeping and cleaning. Now I remember one day I was about the walk down a steel ladder, stairway, between two decks and Frank Partridge was at the bottom with a scraper and a chipping hammer in his hand scraping rust off the ladder and I thought, "Here is a man who has achieved that outstanding award and yet these bastards in the officer class have got him doing that menial task."

I was going to say, these were national treasures who were being made to do absolutely menial tasks.

Just to keep them occupied. Instead of organising lectures, showing them films.

Or having them talk and share some of their experiences.

Yes, exactly.

So they were all being expected to do these kinds of chores?

Yes.

That's appalling.

It was probably only three or four hours a day, to keep them occupied.

Even so. Not good. So Partridge impressed you. What was it about Partridge that impressed you?

His mild and meek manner. He was a man who confronted the Japanese.

Killed them in cold blood, and yet to talk to him it was like talking with the postman. Entirely different sort of person, as though it was two people. Very knowledgeable, very intelligent. I don't know if you remember he was successful as a radio quiz personality.

Of course, on Bob Dyer's *Pick a Box*.

Exactly, yes.

Frank Partridge and Barry Jones.

Yes. I could warm to the VC winners because they were all non-commissioned people; sergeants, privates and so on. I couldn't warm to the George Cross winners because all of them were officers.

What was it about them? Was it the fact that they were officers or was it something about them personally?

It was the fact that at that time there were two classes of people in all the services. The officers and the others. Things are vastly different now. And they were part of that system.

Are we saying that the officers were behaving like officers and putting on a bit of front?

Absolutely, yes. You would talk with them, they would respond. They would polite, they would be remote. They would not initiate a discussion and as soon as was decently apparent they would terminate the association.

That's not my experience of army people or naval people?

Yes, but you're a generation removed from me.

I met some SAS [Special Air Service] people in Western Australia a couple of years ago and there was absolutely no front, no attitude whatsoever.

Well, I've just come from Nowra and on a number of occasions in the last five years I've come up against, I've met socially the commanding officers of the various units down there including the captains, different captains at different times. There all friendly, "Hello, George, how are you, good to

see you," that sort of thing. It's quite different these days from what it was then.

So you got back to Australia, did you then return to *Albatross*?

Return to *Albatross*, yes. Now, by this stage then I had married Shirley; we lived in married quarters for a while which was very comfortable and then we lived in Huskisson in these different little, crummy little places and decided that we would build our own home. At that stage Shoalhaven Shire had land that they wanted occupied in Huskisson. And this was crown land and they advertised it to be available to those who wanted it, to build a house. So I applied and I was allocated a 99 year lease of a suburban block of land to build a house. And that was going to cost me four pounds ten shillings a year, for the next 99 years. And we built our own house, and when I say we built it, we did. We dug the foundations, we mixed the concrete for the footings, we laid the bricks, we bought the timber, we nailed it together, we erected the frame, we got the fibro cement sheet and Shirley held it while I nailed it. I got up on the roof and she passed the corrugated iron up to me and we moved into the house. We had three glass windows and four other windows that were covered with tarred paper. We had a slow combustion stove which provided the cooking and the heating in the winter and the hot water. We had no electricity and the toilet was a WC down the back yard. But it was "ours", and that's where we started.

Sounds pretty good. It must have felt pretty good to have invested so much of your own energy into it and to know that it was yours actually?

Yes.

During this period were you going to sea at all?

Yes, that was one of the factors that contributed to me resigning ultimately, but coming back a bit. Having been at Nowra, *Albatross* again, for a little while I had been in the rank of petty officer, for almost six years. I got a very early promotion. I was a petty officer at the age of 20.

Typically they are 28 these days. But I had been in the position for six years. Now the next rung up at that time was chief petty officer. So I said to my boss, “Eh, isn’t it about time I was a chief?” He said, “Probably, I’ll look into it.” He came back to me a few days later and he said, “I’ve got some bad news for you.” “We have now what is known as establishments in the service and the establishment says that we have “X” number of chief petty officers, and there are a number of others who in terms of seniority in your rank, they are ahead of you, and I’ve done some calculations and if you stay your full term of 12 years until age 30, you’ll never make chief.” I thought, “Well, that’s great.” But he said, “I’ve got some good news for you,” “we’re short of officers, would you like to be an officer?”, and I said, “Not particularly.” He said, “It pays well, and you’re married and you could do with the money, can’t you?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “All right, there are some exams to pass. I’ll help you.” So within six weeks I’d sat the exams and I’d passed them and I was made a sub-lieutenant. So I was an officer and then I started to see things from a different perspective. I started to see things that the lower deck doesn’t see; behaviour of officers. Some of them behaved like gentlemen, some of them behaved like professionals. Many of them did not. Things like getting drunk at lunchtime and going to bed for the afternoon. At sea, things like getting drunk. Now this was when I quit the service; this was two years prior to the Voyager accident and you will have heard about the alleged drunken Duncan, the captain of the Voyager.

Captain Stevens.

Duncan Stevens, yeah. No relation to me. But that was one of the factors contributing to me deciding I didn’t want to be part of this navy any more. There were arrogant officers. There were officers who were getting drunk regularly, and another thing that got up my nose was this promotion on the basis of time in the job. We had appointed to *Albatross* a deputy electrical officer. The electrical officer was responsible for everything electrical on the station. Power distribution, emergency lighting, air field lighting, radio communication, radar installations, the whole box and dice. And he had a deputy appointed, and that deputy was

a good man. He left for another job in the navy office and they appointed another one. Now this guy who I will simply call big Bill Rayman, the electrical officer, introduced Harry to me. And he said, “George, I want you to take Commander Harry around and show him all your installations you are responsible for.” So it took him to the control tower and showed him what happens there, and then I went out to a place they called GCI: the Ground Control Interception. This is the low frequency, very high power intercept radar. And I started to explain this to Harry and Harry interrupted me and he said, “Look George, all this crap’s beyond me. I just don’t understand it. Lets go back.” Now I thought, “Now here’s a man who is the deputy electrical officer, my superior. He hasn’t the faintest idea about what I do. He’s been promoted simply because he has been in the job longer than other people. And that really got up my nose. So there were three things. One, promotion on the basis of time, not ability. Two, this drunkenness business. Three, I worked out that if I stayed in the navy and retired at age 55 then I would be away from my family for a total of six years. You see, when our son Matthew was born I was in the Philippines and he was almost three months old before I saw him. So those three things together said I don’t want any part of this navy any more. It’s not what I thought it would be. So I said I was going to resign. And everyone said to me, “You can’t resign, naval officers don’t resign.” I said, “You watch me.” And I did. And I got out, and that’s when the hard work started.

When did you get out?

It was very early in 1961.

Prior to that, of course, had come the Korean War?

Yes.

Now how aware were you of the Korean War before you got involved in it?

Oh, quite aware because when I joined *Sydney* for the coronation contingent, she’d just come back from a term in Korea and at the time of

the coronation hostilities were still in place. They were still in place until late July, I think. So when we came back from the coronation, people were dispersed all over the place and because I happened to be on *Sydney* I was appointed as the petty officer in charge of the air radar workshop. I had responsibility for all the maintenance of the air raid equipment and the Fireflies and Sea Furies at the time. Piston engine aircraft. So I happened to be on *Sydney* when she made her next trip to Korea. That was about eight months later we came back from Korea.

Now I gather you arrived in Korea just as the Armistice was signed?

That's right. The armistice was signed sometime in August I think it was and I got there about eight weeks later. So hostilities had ceased but to all intents and purposes everything was still on a war footing. Reconnaissance aircraft were flying each day. Troops were going through all their practices. We, in *Sydney*, were based at a town called Kure, which is only a few miles from Hiroshima. It's a port, a port on the inland sea. Inland sea is absolutely beautiful, pictorially beautiful. High mountains, trees, lots of islands, lovely. And our routine was to replenish at Kure and then sail west through the inland sea through a very narrow strait between the main island of Hokkaido [actually Honshu] and Kyushu to the south, through the straits of Shimonoseki. Across the Korean strait into the Yellow Sea which is to the east of mainland China and to the west of the Korean Peninsula. We would then steam slowly backwards and forwards up and down the Yellow Sea for perhaps three weeks. Each day we would launch aircraft who would do reconnaissance. And then when we ran out of fuel and supplies back to Kure for replenishment. At the time I got there Shirley wrote me a letter and she said that she had a friend from the surfing days, Peter Blackford, who joined the army and who had been wounded in the front line in Korea just prior to me getting there. He was in hospital in Kure so I went to see him. I'll never forget the stark atmosphere of that hospital. You walk into a hospital ward and there are white sheets and there is flowers and there is music and there is banter going on. In this hospital it was, and when I say stark, I mean

stark. It was quiet, the lights were dim because the ward was full of seriously injured people. Peter spoke with me for perhaps half an hour and then I could see that he was quite uncomfortable so I left. Now what had happened was, just before I got there Peter was in the front line in Korea.

Okay, so George if we can continue this story about your visit to the hospital to see your friend Peter.

Yes, and I was just thinking it's different these days, thinking about what happened in Bali recently it's different these days from then. The story of Peter is that he was in the front line as an infantry man and it was planned that there would be an attack made on the North Korean positions and the coordinated attack was to be supported by artillery fire from behind the lines. And the artillery was under the command of the Canadian Army. There was dreadful miscommunication and instead of the Canadians shelling the North Koreans they shelled the Australian position in the front line, killing a number of Peter's mates in his unit, and injuring some, one of who was Peter. This is euphemistically called "friendly fire" these days. Some friend. Peter suffered a very nasty leg wound to his right leg, above his knee. For some weeks the surgeons were trying to save his leg by pinning the shattered fragments of bone together and hoping that by treatment with antibiotics like penicillin, that the wound would heal. But just a matter of days after I saw Peter they decided that this was impossible and they amputated his leg as a consequence. And I was thinking about this the other day. Had that sort of thing happened today, as with Bali, they would have put Peter in an aircraft, flown him back here to Australia where there was immediate, and high quality, and high availability of medical and surgical service that would be available. But in those days it just didn't happen at all. So Peter was unfortunate and he lost his leg. But those sorts of things do happen in war. I've never been so cold in all my life as I was in Korea. It was the middle of winter. This was Christmas of 1953 and we were issued with long john underwear. Now I don't know if you've ever seen pictures of your great grandfather in his passion killing underwear. Neck to knee, full arms, full

legs, button up down the front. There was absolutely no way I was going to wear this stuff, until I got to the cold of Korea and then even Marilyn Monroe couldn't have got it off me.

So you were talking about how Marilyn Monroe wouldn't be able to get your passion killers off you.

Yeah, it was so cold. But surprisingly at one stage we were invited ashore at Incheon, which is the port of Seoul, by the army there. There was a Maori concert party giving a concert and would we like to go and see the concert. So we said, "Yes." This was in a big tent and I'm sure the temperature was at freezing, if not below. And there are these Maori performers in traditional Maori dress, bare arms, bare legs doing their song and dance routine in this freezing weather and we were all sitting there like this.

Now did you actually describe the *Sydney*?

Sydney was a light aircraft carrier of the old style, in as much as it had a straight flight deck. These days all aircraft carriers have an angled flight deck. The purpose of the angle is such that as an approaching aircraft misjudges the landing it has the ability then to veer slighting to the left and fly along the angle deck off away from the ship. Now the method of recovering of aircraft in the old days and these days is by arrester wires, and there are typically seven of them transversely across the after deck of the aircraft carrier and these arrester wires are there to collect a hook which is dropped hydraulically by the pilot of the aircraft as he is approaching. The idea being that as the aircraft hits the afterdeck of the aircraft carrier, the hook will drag along the deck, pick up an arrester wire and pull the aircraft to a very abrupt halt. In those days being a straight deck there was no opportunity then to veer off to the left, or very little opportunity to veer off to the left safely, in the event that an arrester wire wasn't picked up. And to prevent a serious accident of equipment, aircraft and personnel forward, they used to raise three barrier wires. Now if you can imagine a tennis court net that is perhaps 12 feet high, steel wire, and there are three of these, one after the other. So an aircraft

coming in hits the deck, misses the arrester wires, the hook misses the arrester wires, it would plough into the barrier wires, and thereby save the aircraft and other things forward. Now barriers as they were colloquially called ,didn't happen very often, but in bad weather there was always a very high chance that they would, and they did happen. And I remember one amazing situation where one aircraft came in, it was an old Firefly. It hit the round-down. If you imagine the afterdeck of the aircraft carrier it sort of bends down towards the stern. It hit the round down bounced right over all the seven arrester wires bounced right over the three barrier wires and ploughed into the aircraft parked forward. Wrote off about five other aircraft. That was a unique experience.

Did you witness that?

Yes, yes.

So what went through your mind when you saw this?

I just couldn't believe it, it wasn't happening. It seemed to be happening in slow motion. Now if you see film of aircraft landing on aircraft carriers which is fairly common, they seem to come in at a very high speed, and they do, but on this particular occasion it looked to me as though everything was happening in slow motion. The aircraft came in, and it hit and it bounced, bang.

What happened to the pilot?

He wasn't injured fortunately. But he was severely reprimanded.

Yeah, expensive crash there.

Yes. On occasions and every trip you did, there was always some sort of incident or accident where an aircraft was damaged. Now one of three things would happen. Either the aircraft could be repaired on board because the damage was minor, or it was not sufficiently damaged that it couldn't be repaired and therefore it was stowed in the hanger until we reached Kure again when it was offloaded for repair in the main workshops. Or if it was so badly damaged, "Jumbo", which was the name given to the mobile crane would pick up the aircraft go to the side of the

ship and just drop it in the water. Get rid of it that way. Pull out all the good radio equipment first, of course.

So you've described what a normal landing involves with the wires and the arrester wires and also what happens when it's a not so normal landing. What happens during a normal take off?

It's the same as today. The principal is identical. To become airborne, an aircraft has to achieve a certain speed relative to the air. Now, free take offs as they are called, can happen, providing that there is sufficient deck space and there is sufficient airspeed over the ship. You can imagine the aircraft carrier, one aircraft right aft. The aircraft carrier is heading into the wind so you've got say 30 knots of wind coming over the deck. The aircraft has sufficient distance to gather speed relative to the air speed to become airborne. Now on a crowded ship when you have got 20 or 30 aircraft to launch off, it's impossible to do free take offs. So they are hydraulically assisted. They have steam catapults. The aircraft taxis forward, the pilot taxis it forward, positions itself over the catapult. The ground crews attach a wire strop to two hooks under the aircraft, back to the steam catapult. Gives the signal, wind up. The aircraft reaches a take off speed. Now the thing that stops it taking off is that it's held at the back by a clip. I'll see if I can explain the clip. If you can imagine a hinged bit of steel hanging down right from the back of the aircraft where the wheel is, with a little knob on it. And around that knob is a clamp, and around the clamp is a steel ring. The combined power of the catapult pulling and the aircraft engine running, pushing the aircraft forward is sufficient to break that steel ring. The two clamps come open; the aircraft is free to take off. And that's what launches the aircraft. The steam catapult and the breaking piece of steel. Amazing isn't it?

It is, yeah.

But going back to the landing. There were many occasions early on in the piece where the pilot really couldn't see what he was doing. Here was the aircraft carrier moving along and here's the aircraft coming into land. It's above the aircraft deck, obviously is has to be, and the pilot can't see.

He’s looking out the sides trying to find out where he is in relation to the ship. They developed the assistance of what is called “the batman”. Now Batman has nothing to do with the founder of Melbourne and nothing to do with Robin. Batman is a trained, experience pilot, and he had two bats, like table tennis bats, only bigger and brightly coloured, red and colour. And he had his own special sponson, right aft, almost at the same level as the flight deck, just a little bit below and as far aft as possible. So batman, when the aircraft were landing, would guide the aircraft in. Now the method of approach was; the ship was steaming into the wind, squadron of aircraft come back, they peel off one at a time. They fly down wind, away from the carrier, they do a left hand turn 180 degrees which lines them up with the track of the aircraft carrier, so they are travelling in the same distance but at a faster speed of course. They have to catch up. Now at the appropriate time, when they are approaching perhaps quarter of a mile off, Batman starts signalling, “You’re right wing is too high, come down.” “You are still too high, you are too low.” Get the idea. So he would give the signals that brings the aircraft in, so the pilot focuses on batman, he doesn’t focus on the ship, total reliance on batman. At the appropriate time batman gives one of two signals. Either cut or away, and if he gives that signal and the pilot has to give full thrust and get away from the ship and come around again. That has been replaced by the mirror landing system, so in later days the pilot would simply watch himself reflected in the mirror, parabolic mirror, lights, he could see himself in relation to the deck by the lights. He would know what his orientation was, no problem.

Incredible, amazing. Now what were your responsibilities at this time?

Once I was commissioned, I was first of all the assistant electrical officers for what the called the Carrier Air Group—*Melbourne* Carrier Air Group. And that group comprised two squadrons of Gannet aircraft and one squadron of Sea Venom aircraft. The Gannet aircraft was an interesting aircraft, propeller driven, kerosene turbine engine, what they called a double-mamba engine. That was the trade name driving two contra

rotating propellers. Now to get the aircraft airborne, and it carried a crew of three incidentally. To get the aircraft airborne both engines and both propellers had to be going. But once it got airborne it could fly on one engine which gave it an incredibly long duration range and it could go out and search for submarines hour after hour after hour. The Sea Venom aircraft was a search and attack fighter aircraft. Quite different. So my responsibility initially was as the assistant electrical officer for that group. Subsequently they decided that each squadron would have its own engineer officer. It had it's own squadron CO, had its own senior pilot, its own pilots, its own observers and its own engineer officer and electrical officer, and that was my second job as a commissioned officer. The AEO [Aviation Engineering Officer] of 805 Squadron.

Now I think you said *Melbourne* Carrier Air Group, did you mean *Sydney* or was that a different?

No, when I was commissioned, *Melbourne* was the aircraft carrier at the time. I'm jumping ahead in time, I'm sorry. Going back the days of *Sydney* I had two responsibilities. One was as the workshops maintenance engineer for the radar equipment. And secondly to assist the deck crews, the squadron crews, in the launches of aircraft. Each day as I said, this is during the Korean War, we'd be patrolling up and down the Yellow Sea and probably about 6 o'clock in the morning in the freezing cold we would line the aircraft up and perhaps spend two hours on the aircraft deck in these freezing conditions getting them airborne and then later on when they came back from their reconnaissance flight, securing them, making sure they were okay, repairing anything that was necessary. So I had those two responsibilities. Some workshop, some on the flight deck.

Now what was your understanding of what the Korean War was all about?

Well, I'm not quite sure I really understood it. I was told that communism, the ideology of communism, was a threat to the capitalist society in which we lived and that it was bad and it had to be stopped. And the way to stop it was not by diplomatic or negotiating means but by actually going out

and killing them. And that's really what happened until some people started to see sense and say, "Hey, this is not the way to fix the problem." And that has made sense. In all those years, in those past 50 odd years there has been no real war between the north and the south. It's been a stand off. Now the problem's not solved, but they haven't been killing each other. That's no way to solve any problem by killing.

Was this something that you questioned at the time?

Not so much at the time. I was doing my duty to Queen and country. I believed in the infallibility of the naval system. I did what I believed was the right thing to do. It's only in later years I've had a chance to think in retrospect about those things. So no, I don't believe it was the right thing at all. Not now.

What was your understanding of what communism was back then?

Communism was an ideal world where the wealth was shared equally by all. Where there was no superior and no inferior class. Where there was no rich and there was no poor. Where everyone contributed equally to the whole society. That was my concept of communism. And I could see that it just didn't exist. It was an ideology. But I don't know if I've answered the question?

Yeah, you certainly did answer it, yeah? So where was the *Sydney* based?

Based in this inland sea port of Kure, which as I said before was very close to the town of Hiroshima. I studied the Japanese language for two years at one stage.

Where you able to visit?

Able to.

Able to visit?

Yes I took a train trip there on two occasions and was, I won't say devastated, but shocked by the extent of the damage which still existed so many years after the atom bomb was dropped. There were no

buildings above three stories. There were vast treks of land where all you could see were little humpies. Tin roofs, thatched roofs where people lived. The Japanese economic recovery was a marvel of that century I think. To go from what they had to what they achieved in the next 25 years was astonishing. Now admittedly they had American foreign aid but even if they had not had that foreign aid, I still think they would have achieved a remarkable recovery of some nature.

How were you received by the people of Hiroshima?

With suspicion. With reserve. Avoided. Different from Kure. Kure was the base for the Australian Navy and a few kilometres around was another town called Iwakuni. Iwakuni was the base for the Australian Army. So for some years since the BCOF, British Commonwealth Occupation Forces, went into Japan after the armistice, the people of Kure had become conditioned to Australians being there. Australians being what they are, typically gregarious, friendly and so on, the people of Kure regarded us as buddies. Particularly as we had money to spend.

But not the people of Hiroshima?

But not the people of Hiroshima, no. They didn't know us. And Americans were even more avoided than Australians in Hiroshima.

Could you understand those reasons? Could you understand that behaviour?

Oh yes, because the Americans were seen as the villains in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They are the ones who flew the aircraft. They are the ones who developed the bomb regardless of the fact that other people and nations were involved in the development of the bomb. They were the ones who did it. They are the Americans.

What else did you see there in terms of physical injuries of the people?

I didn't see any of the things that you read about. The horrible scars, the burns or anything like that on the people. All I saw was the results of the effects of the bomb on the buildings and surrounds.

And obviously in the way that they behaved to the Americans and Australians.

Yes, all foreigners.

So getting back to Kure. Describe Kure to me?

At that time Kure was a village. It had a main street with shops on either side, and behind the shops were living quarters, residences. And again these residences were little more than humpies. Nothing substantial at all in the way of any sort of buildings, other than those buildings which had been ex Japanese Army or Navy offices or workplaces or administrative centres. And there were a few of those there. Two or three storey brick steel constructions. But for the people, they lived in humpies. A similar sort of thing in Hong Kong, just to digress. In Hong Kong today there are multi storey buildings literally everywhere. When we first went in there during the Korean War, there were vast areas of humpies occupied by migrants who have struggled across the border without getting shot from communist China. Now an interesting thing was all these people had to be fed and they developed a practice, an enterprise called “Jenny’s Side Party”. Now Jenny’s Side Party was started by an enterprising Chinese gentleman and he recruited a number of women, dozens and dozens of them to go aboard all the ships in Hong Kong harbour regardless of whether they were merchant ships or service ships. And collect all the food scraps. So you can imagine in the aircraft carrier *Sydney*. Down in the stokers mess, they finish their meal, Jenny’s Side Party girls come around, pick up the plates, scrape up the food into different containers, typically buckets, which they’d take ashore and sell as food to these migrants from communist China. The real money was made by the food that was left over in the galley. The food that wasn’t served out. And that made millionaires of a number of Chinese people, Jenny’s Side Party. And there were quite literally hundreds or maybe thousands of Chinese women who were part of this fascinating enterprise, Jenny’s Side Party.

What a wonderful idea.

Yes.

Now getting back to Kure again, I believe that you had to stay within a set perimeter?

That's right, yes. The occupation force requirements were that servicemen were allowed into certain very restricted areas only, in our particular area Iwakuni or Kure, and to go to a place like Hiroshima we had to get special permission. A signed document: yes this person can travel. The same happened to the east in Yokosuka which was the port for Yokohama in Tokyo, and that was an American base port. The same sort of thing there. If the Americans wanted to go somewhere like Tokyo. We went to Tokyo a couple of times; we had to have a signed document saying yes, this person has approval to travel to this city during this period.

What was Tokyo like?

If I said it was like Christchurch, New Zealand on a Sunday morning, that wouldn't be much of an exaggeration. Very few people. In the Ginza [famous business district] you could quite literally fire a gun and not hit anyone. Where they all were I don't know, but they weren't out on the streets. There were a few servicemen around; there were a few Japanese police around but the place was, by and large, deserted. It was fascinating.

How much interaction did you have with the Americans?

As little as possible. We just didn't seem to get on for some reason. We thought they were loud mouth and they thought we were parochial and insular. Both was probably right.

And what about how much interaction you had with the local Japanese people in Kure?

A lot if they were tradespeople. And if they were more particularly retail people. They had to make a living by selling. We had money. They had things that we wanted. Silk products, lacquer ware, cloisonné work. All those sort of artefacts which to us were fantastically cheap. I'm sure we paid three times as much as they were worth, but both parties were very

satisfied. So we had a lot of interaction with them. Prostitution was rife there too. You could walk down the street at night and be accosted 20 times. “Hello boy san. Me cherry girl,” meaning I’m a virgin. Many of the fellas succumbed of course, because they were very attractive some of these women. After a couple of visits to Kure at night time it started to appal because it was a village atmosphere and one night I decided I’d go back to the ship early, by myself. Now the method of transport from the ship’s wharf to Kure was by, I forget the name of what they called these vehicles, but if you can imagine a motorcycle with a rear wheel taken off, an axle put on the back and two wheels. You had a motor tricycle. Now on top of that chassis an almost circular body placed with an almost circular bench that would seat five passengers. So he had the Japanese motorbike driver in the front and he’s got five passengers around the back. Now this thing was their taxi transport and they’d probably go at top speed something like 10 to 15 kilometres per hour along the bumpy road. And this particular night I decided I would go back to the ship early, and before I tell you the rest of the story I’ve got to tell you there were two expressions that were of prime importance when you are haggling with the shopkeepers. One is, number one “ichiban,” ichiban means number one which means “it’s the best, it’s the top.” But the other end of the spectrum there is “juban”, juban is number ten. That’s the pits, it’s the worst. So on this particular night I went back to the ship in this thing by myself and the typical fare was something like 200 yen. So if four of us took a motor taxi that would be 50 yen each. And I wasn’t going to pay 200 yen for a ride by myself so I offered the driver a 100 yen. And he argued, as he would, and I argued because I was in a foul mood. And all of a sudden I started to realise that I was in a precarious position because this guy was probably in his thirties. Probably a year or so earlier he had been at the other end of a bayonet fighting Australians, and all of a sudden I could see myself with a knife between my ribs. So I edged him over towards the sentry and I said, “Sentry, I think the right fare from Kure to here is 100 yen, and he says 200 yen, what do you think?” Naturally he said “It’s a hundred yen,” and there was a dead silence and

racing through my mind were these warnings that I had had before, “Watch his eyes, that will tell you when he is going to move.” No, no, “Watch his hands because they are the ones that are going to do the damage,” no, no, no, “Watch his feet because they will tell you the way he’s going to move.” And after what seemed like an hour, which was probably two seconds, he said with all the vehemence he could put into his voice, he said, “Number ten” and got on his motorbike and rode off. So all sorts of interesting experiences.

You mentioned the cherry girls, otherwise known as prostitutes. How prevalent was VD [venereal disease] back then?

Surprisingly little as far as I can ascertain. Part of the deal with a prostitute was that “Mama san”, who ran the brothel, would provide condoms. So the opportunity for sexual transmitted diseases was quite considerably limited. I don’t know. I can’t recall. We were always warned of course on the ship before anyone went ashore or came into a port about the potential for venereal disease and to take precautions. “If you have to go and sleep with a woman, take precautions.” But I don’t recall any aftermath, any admonition coming from the medical officer on the ship saying, “We’ve just had a week in so and so port in Manila and this is the situation.” Nothing like that at all.

How often were the Australian men going with the Japanese women?

How often?

Yeah.

I don’t know, but I would say frequently because it was quite a business as far as the women were concerned.

Were Australian men going with other Japanese women aside from the prostitutes?

Some, a very few as I understand it, were at the time, apparently serious about a permanent relationship. Many of those didn’t come to fruition, and as a consequence there are right now today, a number of half breeds

in Japan who are looked down upon by the pure Japanese. They are a product of an Asian and a European liaison.

Were any of those relationships successful?

I believe a few were, yes. I came across in Melbourne a Japanese woman whose husband was an army sergeant who died in Australia. Had a heart attack. They had a son, and that relationship apparently was a very successful one. So yes, there were some successes, but I think they were in the minority. That sort of thing is sort of tolerated in Australia, more so these days with this wretched multiculturalism that we have. But in Japan its not. If you're not pure Japanese, regardless of who you are, you are not part of the Japanese society. You are ostracised.

What was your opinion of the Japanese?

Two faced, they'd smile and they'd bow and you had the feeling all the time that they hated your guts. You are the victor, we are the vanquished and we don't like that, but we won't let you know. We will smile.

How much of that feeling was reciprocated do you think?

Reciprocated in what way?

How was it that the Japanese had this feeling towards you? How much of that was reflected back on what the Australians felt towards the Japanese?

Some, particularly when it came, most of the time it was accepted but on occasions we would be reminded about instances like Sandakan, Burma Railway, things like that and that's when the hatred on our part would boil up. But I won't say that they were isolated instances as such but they were periodic, interspersed with much of the time. They were just awfully nice people.

George, you mentioned before your two positions on board the *Sydney*. If you could go into a bit more detail about what those jobs actually involved?

Yes, the official position was technician in charge of the radar repair

shop. The aircraft would carry search and attack radar and most of the equipment in those days was designed around the thermionic valve. The thermionic valve is a glass valve in which there is an incandescent burner, which emits electrons. The electrons are accelerated through the thermionic valve providing the amplification for the signals. They are obviously by nature of the construction subject to damage, relatively easy damage, particularly from impact Gs. You can imagine an aircraft landing on a deck, thump, where the impact G might be in the vicinity of four or five, which is quite considerable. That sort of impact has very little effect on transistors, but thermionic valves, by nature of the construction, it can damage them. Therefore there were many occasions after a reconnaissance flight or a sortie where the communication equipment, the radar equipment would fail to work, and probably 99 per cent of the cases it was due to the thermionic valve failure in the equipment, caused by the thump. So my workshop was set up to do the repair to the radar equipment as a consequence of that. So after each flight sortie, reconnaissance, whatever you want to call it, I would typically have quite a few hours of work. Then I would have nothing to do. The unofficial part of my job, was when there was an aircraft launch, I would go up onto the flight deck and help the squadron maintenance people get the aircraft ready and sort out any immediate problems that happened at the time. On one particular occasion early in the morning the observer signalled me as having a problem with one of his pieces of equipment. I hopped up onto the main plane stub, because he opened the canopy, looked inside, decided what the problem was and I forget what it was at the moment, but we fixed it there and then. I turned around to get off the aircraft and slipped on the icy steel of the, on the icy metal of the aircraft and fell onto the flight deck and landed on my backside. And years later that has been the source of a problem which has resulted in a partial disability pension that I get from Veterans' Affairs. But it took a long time for me to realise that that was the prime cause. Fortunately there was medical records in archives that supported the claim, otherwise I might have had some difficulty. But ever since then I have been very, very grateful to Veteran's

Affairs for that partial pension. It's not just the money itself, prior to the gold card which I have, it was the payment of treatment necessary.

Yeah, it sounds like it's a painful physical condition.

Particularly after I have been sitting still for a while in a motor car or this chair. And surprisingly at night time or early in the morning I have considerable difficulty out getting out of bed in the morning. Once I'm up and moving things are okay. But it goes right back to that particular incident.

Yeah, it's amazing you know. You hear about back problems but just once it goes, its so hard to get it back on track isn't it?

Yes, I know an interviewer in your organisation who has got a disc problem. Makes him an irritable and cranky sort of person.

He's all right. Now you have talked about your duties now but what would be a typical day for you on board the *Sydney*?

Well we slept in hammocks on the *Sydney*. Get out of your hammock, lash up and stow, seven lashes, stow the hammock. Shave, get dressed, queue up for breakfast, go down to the workshop and see if there is anything hanging over from yesterday that needed to be doing. If there were aircraft that were about to be launched go up to the flight deck and see what I could do to help out, just to keep me occupied. Wait for the aircraft to return knowing perfectly well that there would be work. And I looked forward to that work. Occasionally there were modifications to be carried out to some of the equipment but not too often. Sometimes because of the volume and the nature of the problem I might work through the whole night fixing. This didn't happen often, fixing the problems. But most of the time by evening the work was done so it was unlike the routine of others who had been on watch at four o'clock, came off watch at eight o'clock. By and large I was driven by the work. The work drove me. I didn't say, "It's eight o'clock I'm going to start." I said, "There is work to be done, I will start," "There's no work to do, I won't do anything." Quite different. I enjoyed that.

Yeah, sounds kind of good. Now who was the captain of the *Sydney* at this time?

A fellow called George Oldham. George is not very well known. You don't find his name mentioned in histories like Hastings-Harrington, Admiral Sir Hastings-Harrington or Sir David Martin. You don't hear about him to that extent, but George was first and foremost, a seaman. He was brilliant at handling his ship. At Kure we had our own wharf, a very well constructed wharf, being Japanese it was well constructed. And at the far end, at the land end of the wharf was a big bluestone wall, huge wall. And in huge letters, ten feet high letters read, "Accident's don't happen, they are caused." Now George used to bring his ship in, and remember there are lots of little islands all around. It's quite confined there. He'd bring his ship in at five or six knots, that's about nine or ten kilometres an hour, which doesn't sound very fast but for a 20,000 ton ship in a confined area that's quite an exciting sort of speed. At sea it's nothing, where you've got expanse of sea all around you, but on these confined situations five or six knots is quite fast. And George used to bring *Sydney* in at quite an acute angle and he'd judge it perfectly. Half a stern, throw out the heaving lines, throw out the mooring lines, tie up. And you could bet your bottom dollar that with him coming around the corner and seeing the wharf, within 15 minutes everything would be all over. He was a brilliant ship handler. As a disciplinarian, didn't see much of him, because being air arm, we were under the direction of the fellow they called "Commander Air". Commander Air had control of all the aircraft operations on the ship. And again as opposed to the Jimmy, that's a colloquial expression for the second in command to the captain who in this particular case happened to be a Commander and in this case the commander was Robertson, the fellow who was the captain of *Melbourne*, later on during the accident. So he had his own responsibilities with the ship people. Commander Air had his own responsibilities with us, the fly boys.

What was the commander of air like?

He was an ex-pilot so he was, will I say a human being? He was an approachable sort of a man. He had been through the ranks. He had done it tough like most pilots. I don't know how some of those guys could continue day after day, week after week, month after month. Some of them year after year, being launched. Typically on a launch, because of the acceleration, you go from zero to maybe 120 kilometres an hour in a matter of point eight of a second. Now that is a terrific G force on you and typically on each launch the crew would black out for perhaps a second, and the method of handling the aircraft at launch was, you know the aircraft has a joystick. Instead of holding the joystick what would happen was the pilot would sit there like this with his hands like that with a joystick in front. The launch would happen, he would blackout and by the time in came around, the joystick was back in his hand. Landing was a lot easier. The G force on landing might have been as much as three and a half, maybe four G's and that was by comparison almost a pleasurable experience. You come in and you are about 80 knots and in a matter of half a second the hook has grabbed the arrester wire and you have stopped. So the G forces are a lot less.

That's incredible that they blacked out. How long would they be blacked out for?

Oh, maybe a second or more, but they would go out, and they knew that. They all knew that.

Better them than me I think. Now for how much longer were you on the *Sydney* for?

I was on the *Sydney* for about two years in total, and that's when I came ashore and that's when I had the discussion with my divisional officer about promotion to chief petty officer and we went through the process then of becoming a commissioned officer.

You've also been saying that you were on the *Melbourne* as well at some point?

Yes, as a commissioned officer. I spent a fair bit of time on *Melbourne*. I

did a number of tours of the Far East, Singapore a number of times, Hong Kong a number of times. Never went into the Philippines in the navy. I went into the Philippines later on when I worked with IBM. But Papua New Guinea. Yeah, the Far East and New Zealand. Oh, I've got to tell you about this. One stage we did a tour of New Zealand. Milford Sound, Wellington, Auckland, Haruaki Gulf, all around New Zealand. Now when we went into Milford Sound, the air was absolutely still. The water was absolutely flat calm and we steamed slowly in and then stopped. Now Milford Sound is fairly narrow, particularly if you've got a big lump of a ship like an aircraft carrier in there. So they put into practice what they called "Operation Pinwheel". And what they did was at each end of the ship they got two aircraft facing in opposite directions and fix them down to the flight deck with wires, steel wires. Started up the engines and slowly spun the ship through 180 degrees; Operation Pinwheel. So she was facing the right way to go out. That was interesting.

Why did they do that?

Well, in order to turn that big lump of a ship round in the restricted area of Milford sound, what they would have had to do was what you do in a car in a tight space. Go forward, turn right, stop, come back again, and make several manoeuvres. This was quite simple, just spin the ship. It probably took five minutes, that was all. But that was quite fascinating to know that a ship that size could be turned around in water just by two aircraft running their engines. They weren't running at high speed either.

Was that the ingenuity of the captain?

I don't know who thought of it, but whoever it was I thought it was a brilliant idea. And they announced it. "Tomorrow we are going to have Operation Pinwheel and this is what pinwheel is all about," and at the appointed time that's what happened.

Fascinating, that's great. Just getting back to the *Sydney* for a little bit longer, you mentioned that you were a member of crew for two years. Now during that time you must have developed friendships, mates, during this time. Could you talk about some of

your mates from the *Sydney*?

Most of them were either in, well all of them I would say were exclusively in the fleet air arm. No, that's not quite true. Most of them were in the fleet air arm, the others were radio mechanics belonging to the ship with whom I had trained in the years past. At Adelaide, at Watson and *Cerberus* and so on. But almost exclusively they were fleet air arm personnel in the radio branch, in the electrical branch, and some of the aircraft handlers. These are the fellas that moved the aircraft around physically. They pushed them and when the aircraft lands and picks up the arrester wire, two fellows rush out and disconnect the hook from the arrester wire. They are the aircraft handlers. So I made friends with some of the aircraft handlers, but mainly they were fleet air arm personnel. Maintenance engineers, air frames, fitters, the electrical and the radio people.

What was the relationship like between the ground crew and the pilots?

Pilots and observers air crew, ground crew and air crew. Generally pretty good. They had the air crew, well let me split it. The pilots had a fairly high regard for the maintenance engineers. The observers had a fairly high regard for my trade and the electricians, because the pilots were using equipment maintained by the engineers and the air frames people. The observers were using equipment maintained by our people. So it was a relationship, good relationship, fostered by the nature of the work that each group was doing.

That's good to hear. Sometimes I think the relationship was a bit more—

Tight.

Yeah, a bit more. They were a bit more antagonistic towards each other. So now during this time that you were on board the *Sydney* and later the *Melbourne* were you able to communicate with, or how often were you able to communicate with Shirley, for

instance.

Sometimes, a few times there was no communication at all. When Matthew was born I received, the ship received a signal, “Request to advise, sub-lieutenant Stevens, the birth of his son Matthew. Mother and son doing well.” I then, could send a signal back to her but I couldn’t have any direct communication because there were simulated war exercises and that sort of communication was not permitted. I don’t think I ever had a radio telephone conversation with her. That was out of economic necessity because that cost money, and money was important. We had a house to pay for and that sort of thing. Letters; I would typically write a letter every two days. The postman would come and deliver five letters to Shirley and she’d rush into the bedroom and open them up and read them. So our main communication was by postal correspondence.

Now I want to explore that a bit further, but before we do that can you just make the link from leaving the *Sydney* and how you came to be on the *Melbourne*?

On the *Sydney* I was maintenance mechanic engineer for the radar equipment exclusively. Went to *Albatross*, similar position, concerned that I wasn’t getting promotion, took the appropriate action, became a commissioned officer and the nature of my work then changed. Changed from being a maintenance engineer to the officer-in-charge of maintenance engineers. So that was the essential difference.

And that’s what you were doing on *Melbourne*?

And that’s what I was doing on *Melbourne*. And that’s what I did for almost six years as a commissioned officer on *Melbourne* and at *Albatross* itself.

And during these changes with these ships were you able to visit Sydney at all. Go back home?

Oh yes. Most of the time that we were married we were either living in rented premises in married quarters at *Albatross*, or in these little dumps in Huskisson, or in our own little nest that we built. And that’s what we

left when I quit the navy.

Now getting back to when Matthew was born. What was it like to receive that telegram?

Oh, highly delighted, because we had been married at that stage; he was born in 1960, we were married in 1953, although the marriage wasn't consummated until 1954. So to all intents and purposes we had been married for six years before he came along. We had counselling, we had medical tests, we tried all sorts of remedies. Eventually we discovered that sex had something to do with becoming pregnant so after six years of marriage without progeny, and wanting it all the time, it was, "Hallelujah, it's happened". And blow me down two years later we had a second one, a daughter.

Now there must have been other feelings as well in terms of not being able to be there for the birth. What were some of those feelings?

Well they resulted in a significant contributing factor to my ultimate resignation. One of the reasons was the drunkenness as I said before, and the promotion on the basis of seniority but I estimated that based on the time of absence from home and the time in the position of a commissioned officer related to a retirement age of 55, I could be expect to be away from home an aggregate of something like eight years. And I thought "What's the point in getting married, if you're going to do this?" Now some families found that great. Not me. I married to have a married life. So you asked me what my feelings were at the time. Delighted of course with the birth of a son but later on I felt I'm not going to go through this again. I'm not going to put Shirley through this again. I'm not going to have her relying on casual friends to look after her in her pregnancy and labour.

Because what was it like for Shirley?

She was happy being in her own home. Her mother wanted her to come to Sydney. Absolutely not, she was going to stay in her own home, even

though, at that stage we did have electricity. We didn't have running water still and the toilet was still out the back. But it was her home and there was no question, she was going to stay there. These good neighbours of ours, elderly couple, took her into Nowra hospital where Matthew was born. Visited her on the day she was there, brought her home again. But once she was home she wanted to be by herself with her little baby.

So how old was Matthew when you got to see him for the first time?

It was about three months I suppose.

What was that like?

Exciting. For two reasons. One, because I was seeing him for the first time, but Shirley took sick, confined to her bed. So I spent from 6 am till about 10 pm every day bathing, feeding, washing nappies, shopping, getting meals, looking after him because she was confined to bed. Interesting time.

Now had you resigned at this point?

No, I resigned, Matthew was just a coming up for a year old when I decided, putting all these feelings together, that I just couldn't stay in it any longer. Had I stayed in the navy, there was a high probability I would have retired as a captain, at least. Because as I said, two of my contemporaries retired as captains. Three retired as commanders. One retired as a commodore. There was a high probability that I would have retired with a good rank and a reasonably good pension. But looking at those three factors, even in retrospect, knowing now how tough it was after I left the navy, I made the right decision to go. The family have become very important to me.

So what happened when you did resign?

All my friends, my boss, Commander L [?], all said, "You can't resign." "Naval officers don't resign." I said, "I'm going." And I wrote my letter of resignation to the naval board. I don't know if you saw that recent

television program where Captain Robertson is quoted as saying, “I requested permission to resign.” Now if that permission had been refused he would not have resigned. I didn’t request permission to resign, I resigned. A significant difference there. That was in October of 1960, and they all said, “Naval board won’t accept that.” But I persisted and by the end of March next year I was out of the navy. And that’s when it started to get hard. Ex naval officer, no problem, everyone’s going to employ me. Two months later, lots of bills coming in, no money coming in, so I swallowed my pride and went to David Jones and sold socks, just to get some money.

And then came the opportunity. I saw an advertisement in the paper that Channel 9 were looking for technicians who had experience in “pulse” technique, because the outside broadcast van, the signals were transmitted on short wave. I was right up to speed on that and they snapped me up. But I didn’t like working in overalls. Snob. You see, a taste of the officer class. Teaches you to appreciate the nice things in life. Didn’t like working in white overalls. Looked for a better opportunity and found this company called IBM that was looking for people who were experienced in pulse technique, because they were introducing a product called a computer.

Now in those days there were something like sixteen computers in the whole of Australia. Big things. They wouldn’t fit into this room. They had the capability of a fraction of a laptop today. It seemed to me as though that was the thing. Now the thing that eventually persuaded me that I had made the right decision after two years of hard work, because at age 32 I was competing with 20 year olds fresh out of university, and that was tough. Some of the training courses I did would start at two o’clock in the morning. Two o’clock in the morning because there was one computer and everyone wanted access to it. So we would start our lectures at two o’clock in the morning, break at six o’clock for breakfast for half an hour, and then we would have time on the computer for practical work. So after two years I started to get results, and all of a sudden I realised I was in a company where you got promotion based on ability. If you did the job and

you produced the results, you got promoted. You weren't promoted because you were in the job for five years ahead of Joe Blow who has been in the job for four years and ten months. That was good. I responded well to that. I got a couple of promotions in the field in Sydney. Then they offered me a job of Field Manager in Melbourne, so I took that. Shirley didn't like it because it was moving away from home. I wasn't there for very long when they said, "Hey you're doing well, we want you to come to head office for a six months management development assignment." So back to Sydney for six months, into rented premises at Cremorne, they paid the rent. And I got rent for our place in Melbourne, and then back to Melbourne in a promotion to Branch Engineering Manager where I had three field managers and a staff of about 22, 23 field engineers working for me.

And then the technology started to develop at a very rapid pace. Integrated circuits became part of the technology. Programming, internal programming became more important. You see in my day when I joined IBM all the programming was in machine language, can you believe that? So the technology started to go past me. By this time I was approaching 40 and I wasn't as quick and as smart as I used to be. And then came the opportunity, because of the growth of the IBM company, came the opportunity to become the Melbourne location Personnel Manager. Now in those days we had about 500 people in Melbourne, quite a big operation, so I took that on and that was a success. I had a couple of trips to New York, ostensibly as development assignments but they were IBM's way of saying, "Hey, you've done a good job; you can have a 'jolly' overseas."

And then the Personnel Manager for the IBM New Zealand company was found to be wanting in his job. So I was offered an assignment there for two years and I took that on. Came back to Australia, to Sydney, and by this time I was in my early to mid-forties, about 42, 43 I suppose, and the system started to work against me. See, in the early days IBM insisted on promoting the young people who showed promise and that was the good and right thing to do. By the time I got to my mid-forties, I was no longer

young. Yes, I had marks on the board, yes I had achieved, but I was no longer young. So I moved then into a series of sideways promotions. Still stayed at the same level. Still got the same sort of salary but the promotion up the ladder was blocked. Younger people were coming on. I didn't like it when it happened to me personally but I knew that that was the way that IBM worked and I knew that it was the right way, so intellectually I agreed with it. Emotionally, I didn't like it. So I did a series of jobs in software development and all sorts of different things. I got into marketing, marketing support, that was fun. That gave me a trip to the Philippines for a couple of weeks, for a recognition event. But by age 57 I'd had enough and I'd accumulated sufficient money to be able to retire, so I thought, which I did. And in 1986 I quit the IBM company.
And then I found another hard thing. For four years I found it difficult to adjust to a life where there wasn't excitement, there wasn't movement, there wasn't energy being displayed, there wasn't creativity, there wasn't innovation. All of a sudden I was out on my own. So I was offered then a job of a two year assignment in the Compaq company as the Personnel Manager. Took that on, then became bored with that. Then another company called Wilson Learning offered me opportunities for contract work delivering education programs, "Negotiating to Yes", "Selling", those sort of programs where I would take a group of people, and in a structured education environment, teach them in a week long live in course. And that was fun for a while. And then an old IBM buddy rang me up one day and he said "Eh," he said, "I've got a large sum of money and I've been commissioned by IBM to head up an organisation that is a joint venture between IBM and TAFE [Technical and Further Education], and it's called CIT, Computer Industry Technology, and we are going to operate out of the TAFE headquarters at, the TAFE premises at St Leonards and we are going to teach two things. We are going to teach, this is a product; MVS, Multi Volume System, which is the operating system for large computers, and we are going to teach AS400, which is the operating system for mid range equipment. And he said "I need someone with your experience as a student counsellor. I am going to take

people from different walks of life. They are going to pay to have us teach them these two products, and it's going to be intensive courses. The courses are going to last for three months each and I need someone who can look after these people, to help them through the difficult periods. Will you take it on as a contract employee?" I said "Yes, beauty." So that was my next job.

In all this Shirley and I started to get involved in community activities. I took on the role of neighbourhood watch coordinator for Greenwich, and manager of the Greenwich community centre and those two activities brought me certificates of recognition from the New South Wales police and the Lane Cove Council. I had two commendations from the Lane Cove Council, 1986 and 1987. And while I was doing that it came to my attention that there was a little girl who was living in Greenwich who was severely inflicted with cerebral palsy. And when I say severely, she is. She is still alive and she needed a Hart Walker, the name of the man who developed this device which helps physically handicapped people walk on their own. Quite a remarkable thing. But this thing was going to cost $12,000, and would I help raise the money. So Shirley and I put our heads together and we put together a program that involved the local schoolchildren in providing entertainment first of all, followed by an auction of donated goods. And on the particular night we had Derryn Hinch to act as the MC [Master of Ceremonies] and we had Peter, whose name escapes me at the moment, to do the auctioneering. And on that one night we raised $16,000. It was a fantastic night. People just jammed the Greenwich Community Hall. They just couldn't get in, and bidding was fierce for all the products. And that brought us a recognition certificate from the Spastic Society. And we were so keyed up; Shirley and I were so keyed up with the success of that that we went looking for another one. We found a little boy in Turramurra, also badly affected by cerebral palsy but not to the same degree as Isobel was. So we put on another function there. Now that was an interesting experience. It was quite different from the Greenwich one. Greenwich is a very tight community. Everyone knows everyone else and putting that program

together was a breeze, it really was. The Turramurra one was different. People would look at us and they would say, “Who are these two old people from Greenwich?” “What are they doing here? What’s in it for them?” You know, “What’s this all about?” And we worked like steam to try and get people interested and enthused about it and we put together a committee but they were sort of half hearted, and two weeks before the whole thing was scheduled to happen up at the Saint Ives community centre I said to Shirley, “This is not going to work, no one is getting behind it” and for some reason, I don’t know what, all of a sudden “boom”, away it went and on that night we raised $22,000.

That’s amazing.

All sorts of things were advertised. One man advertised his services of cleaning out leaves from your gutters, roof gutters. And I was telling Graham [interviewer] before about Brendan Nelson who came along, and he offered as an item to be auctioned a dinner for four people at Parliament House, Canberra, with coffee afterwards with John Howard. And there were two groups of people who bid very fiercely for that. They had to pay their way to Canberra, their fares. They had to pay for their accommodation in Canberra and they paid something like $560 to get this privilege to go and have dinner down there. There were cricket bats, there were signed jerseys, there were paintings, all sorts of a manner of things.

Sounds amazing.

22,000 in one night.

Well George look we are actually coming towards the end of the interview so on behalf of Graham and myself and I’m sorry that’s a bit of rush towards the end though but I think we got everything. On behalf of Graham and myself and the Australians at War Archive I’d like to thank you very much for a wonderful day today and sharing your story with us.

Well I appreciate the opportunity of doing this. I’m quite astonished when

I was first approached by Elizabeth. I thought, “What the hell can I talk about? In ten minutes I can tell you all there is to know.”

Well here we are and we have spent the whole day. Thank you.

Okay.